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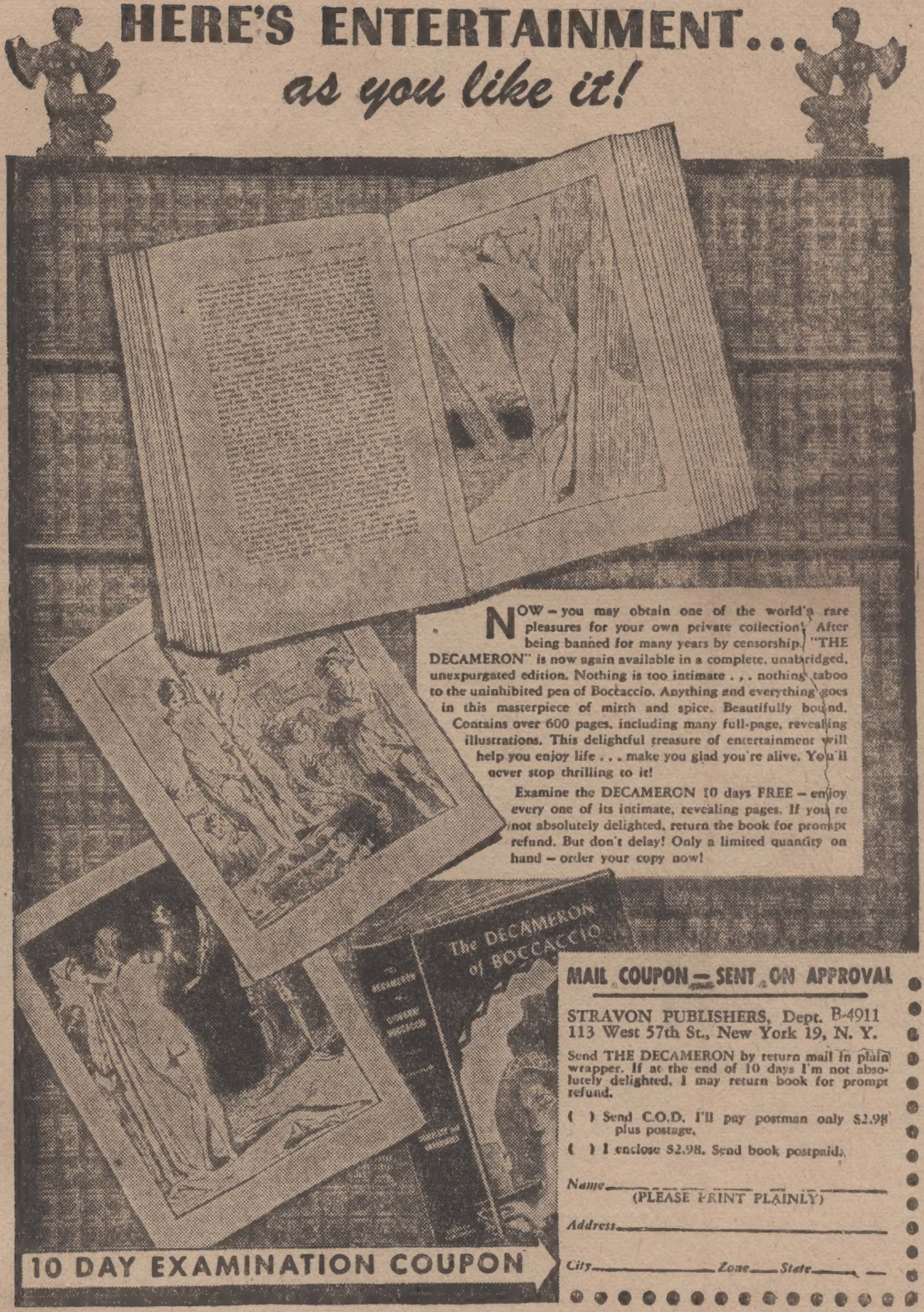

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NOVEMBER 1948

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Front cover painting by Walter Haskell Hinton, illustrating
a scene from "Seminole Secret."

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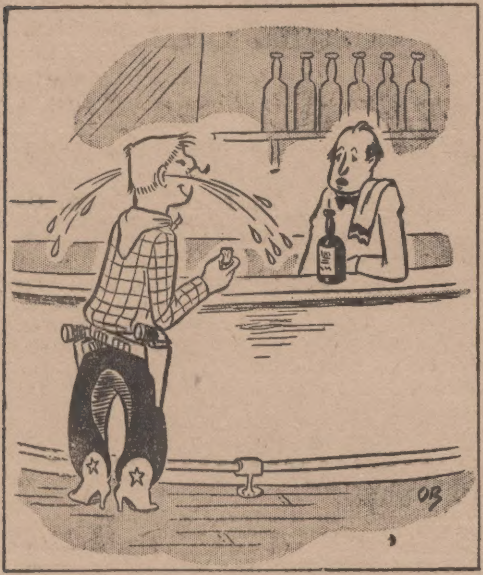
RIDIN' HERD with the Editor

THERE are ten stories in this issue. Which is more than we've had in a long time. And we think they are crackerjack stories, too. We've gone out and got such top-notch writers as Paul W. Fairman, W. T. Ballard, John di Silvestro, Frances M. Deegan and many others. We particularly recommend John di Silvestro to you, and we want to point out that you are going to see that name in the biggest type that can be secured by the biggest slicks. We don't often go out on a limb with such predictions, but this isn't a prediction—it's a sure thing.. The lad is sheer genius, take it from us.

TAKE "The Chinese Cross" for example. When you've read this story, you'll agree that something new in westerns has come along. This story is original in every word. We won't tell you a word about it, because you just can't do that and save the surprise you'll have in store for you with the climax. Just take our word for it and read it first, even if it is the last story in the book. As a matter of fact, no story ever gets shoved into last place in MAMMOTH WESTERN because it isn't a strong story—every story has to be strong in the first place to get into the issue at all.



"I think you've had enough, Pete."

"SEMINOLE SECRET" by Charles Recour is our cover story for this month, and it is as different from the usual run of westerns as we could possibly get—after all, Florida is hardly the west! But when you get through with it, you won't give a hang if we called Tahiti the west! This one's good, and don't forget it. The cover is painted by the famous western artist, Walter Hinton, and we think this painting, done in oils, is worth hanging on our living room wall—and that's where we'd like to hang it, if we could steal it from the dirty rat who has already stolen it! Foozled again, dang it!

"NESTERS DIE HARD" by Paul W. Fairman is very aptly titled. Your interest in this story will certainly die hard—and we predict it will go right on living even after you've finished it. It's a right neat job, Mr. Fairman. We hope to publish very many more like this one from your able typewriter.

"THE THESPIAN OF WOODS CREEK" is by W. T. Ballard and it's another neat change of pace. You never get anything trite or hackneyed or in the groove in MAMMOTH WESTERN. We spend a lot of time trying to make each story fall into a different classification. Variety is the spice of life they say. We think you'll get some big laughs out of this yarn, and also some nice action kicks. Ballard is a boy for our money.

"THE DANCING DUTCHMAN" is by Frances M. Deegan. Now, usually, we western editors think a woman rarely can give a story the action touch a man can—but we take it all back when it comes to Miss Deegan. She writes like a man, and we secretly think, fights and swears like a man. But maybe we're doing her an injustice, because when she comes up to the office, she's the nicest writer we have come up to our office. It's only that when we read her stories, and compare them with her, we can't get rid of that feeling that she actually carries two six-guns on her hips somewhere—but where we wouldn't know, with those hips—they are quite neat. Which about winds us up for this month. We won't mention the large number of features in this issue....*Rap*

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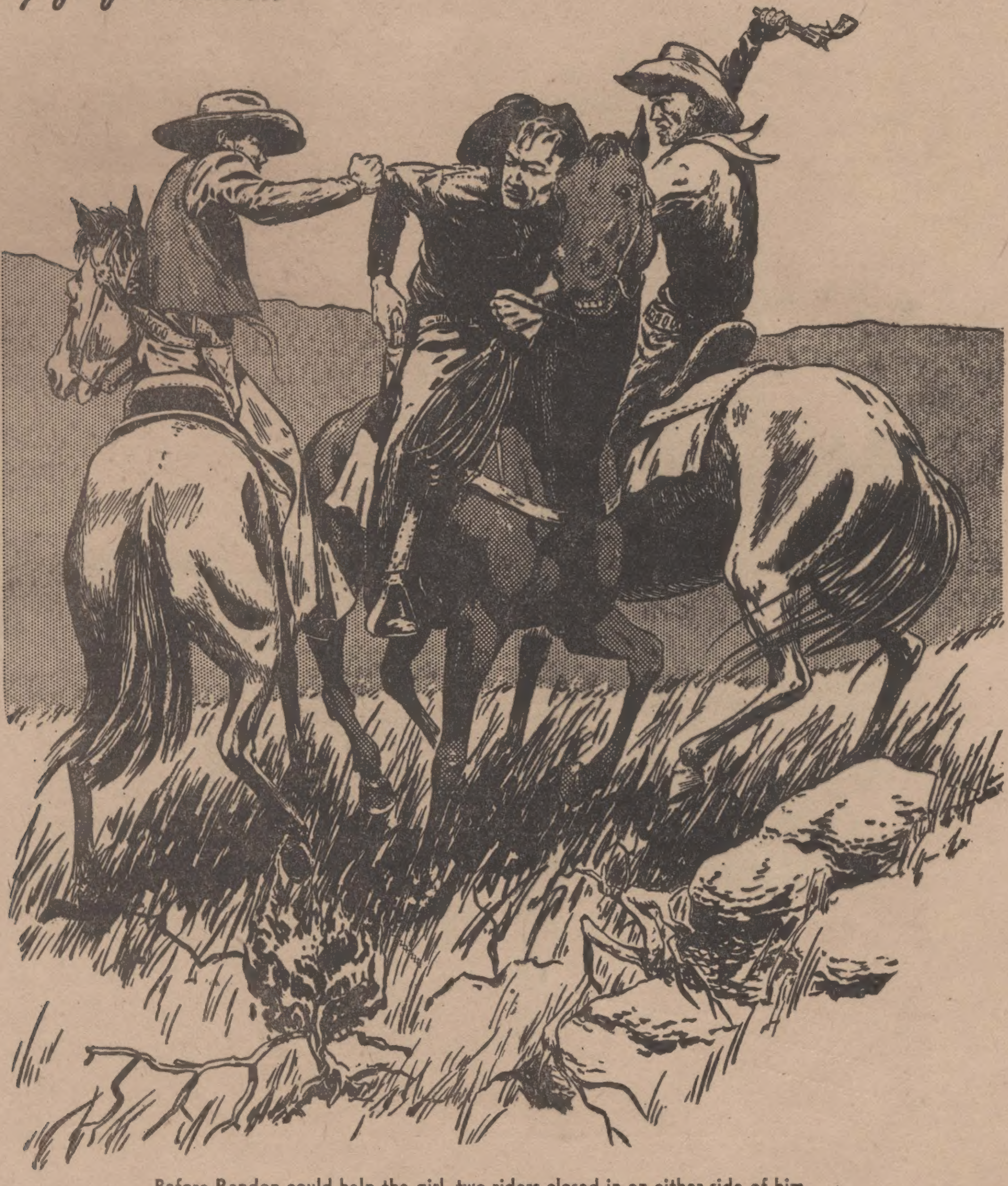
FAST GUN—SLOW DEATH

By J. J. Allerton



Before Randon could help the girl, two riders closed in on either side of him . . .

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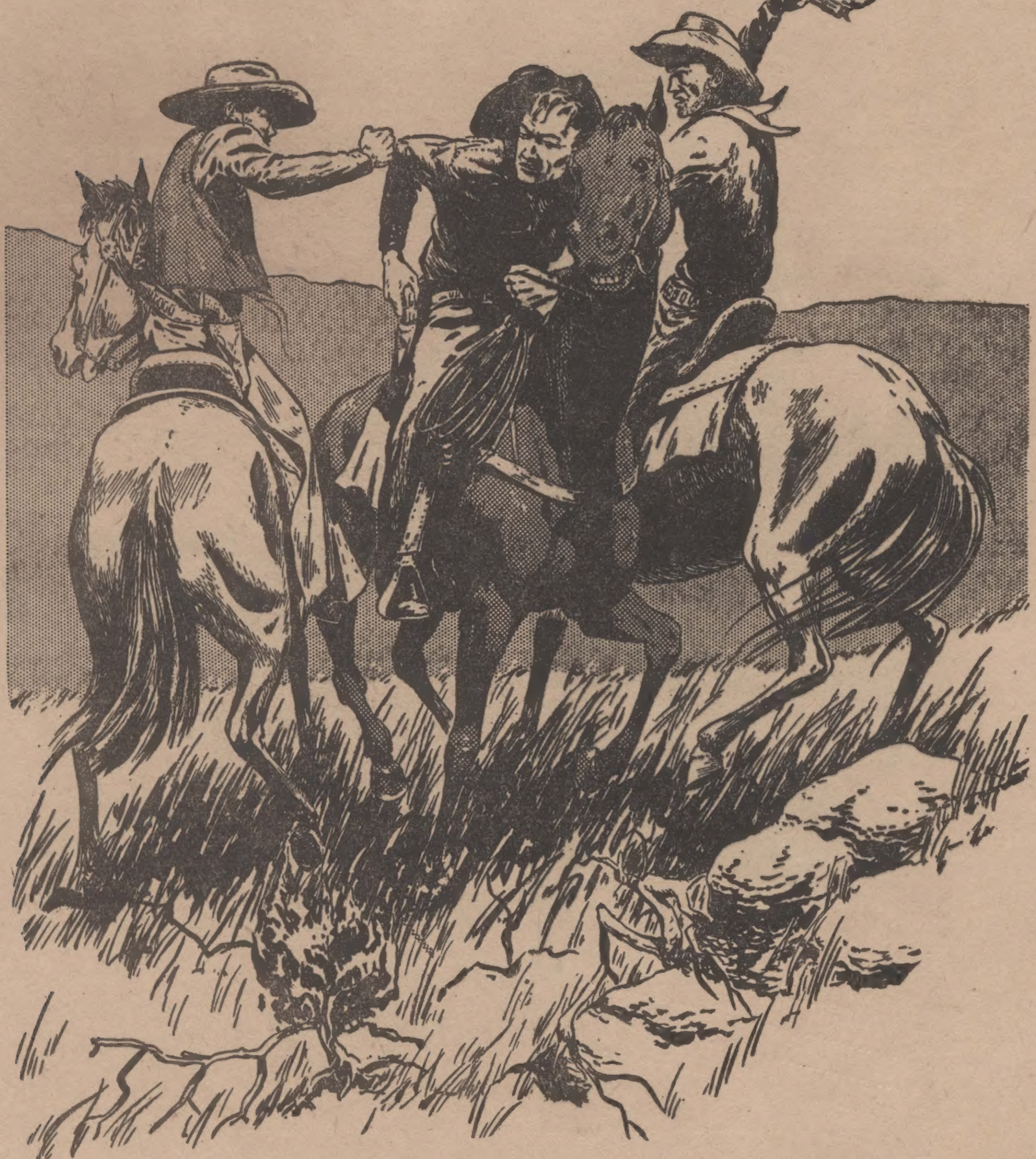
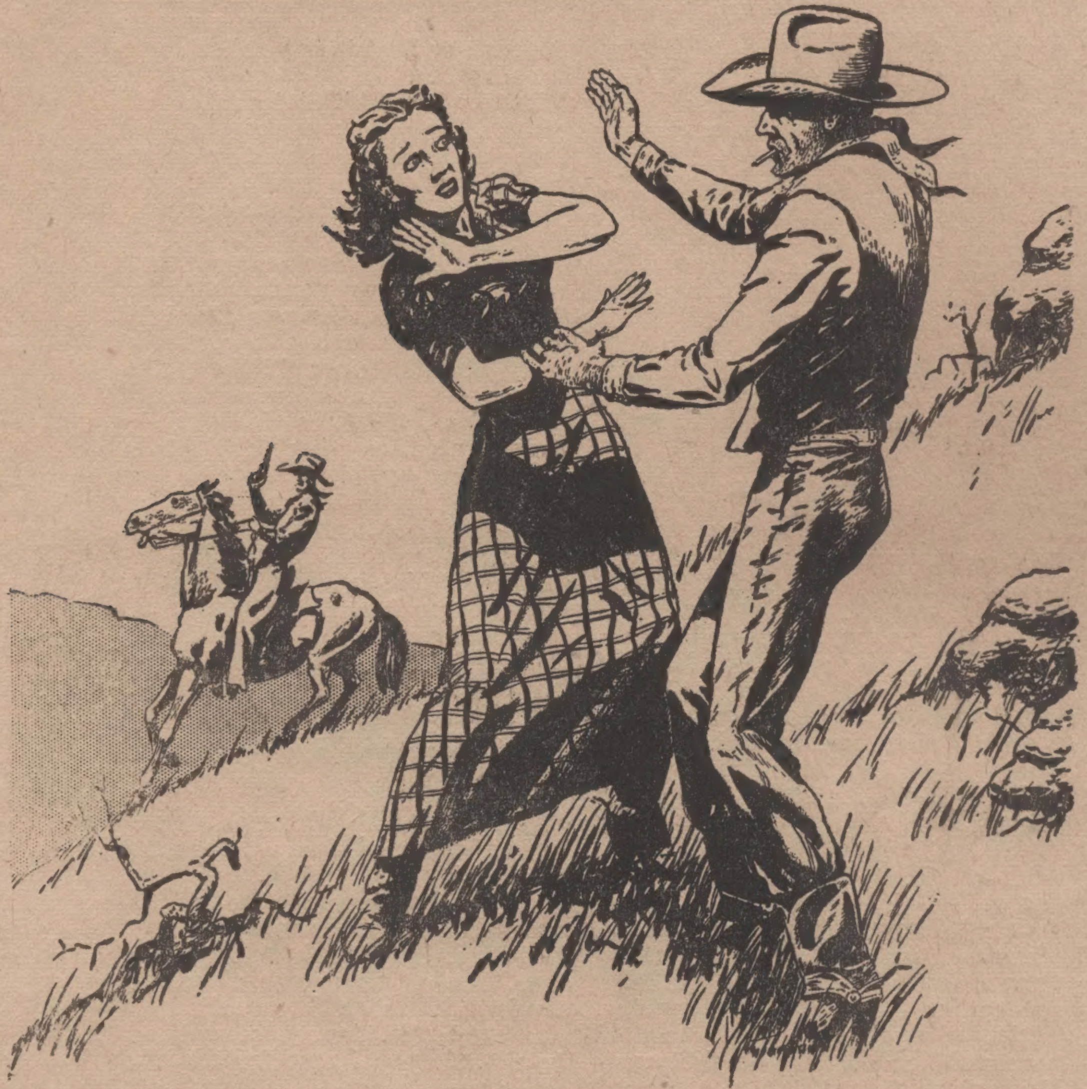
By J. J. Allerton



Before Randon could help the girl, two riders closed in on either side of him . . .

Law in the valley was very simple—the man with the fastest draw lived longer . . .



HER BEAUTY was the last thing one noticed about her. First one saw the ragged attire, the dirt on face, hands and legs, the grim determination in her grey-green eyes and on her lips. Then one saw her beauty, and last of all the huge pistol in her hand.

That was what Randon saw last, the gun in her hand. The smile with which he'd greeted the sight of her scrambling up the enbankment, broadened. But she saw nothing to smile at. The pistol jerked up at him and her lips, better suited to laughter, snarled:

"Reach! Git 'em up . . . !"

Floppy Ears, the coal-black stallion, rolled a walleye at the girl as Randon's legs tightened the least bit. Randon looked down at the slim figure and the smile faded from his mouth. But it lingered in his eyes as he said:

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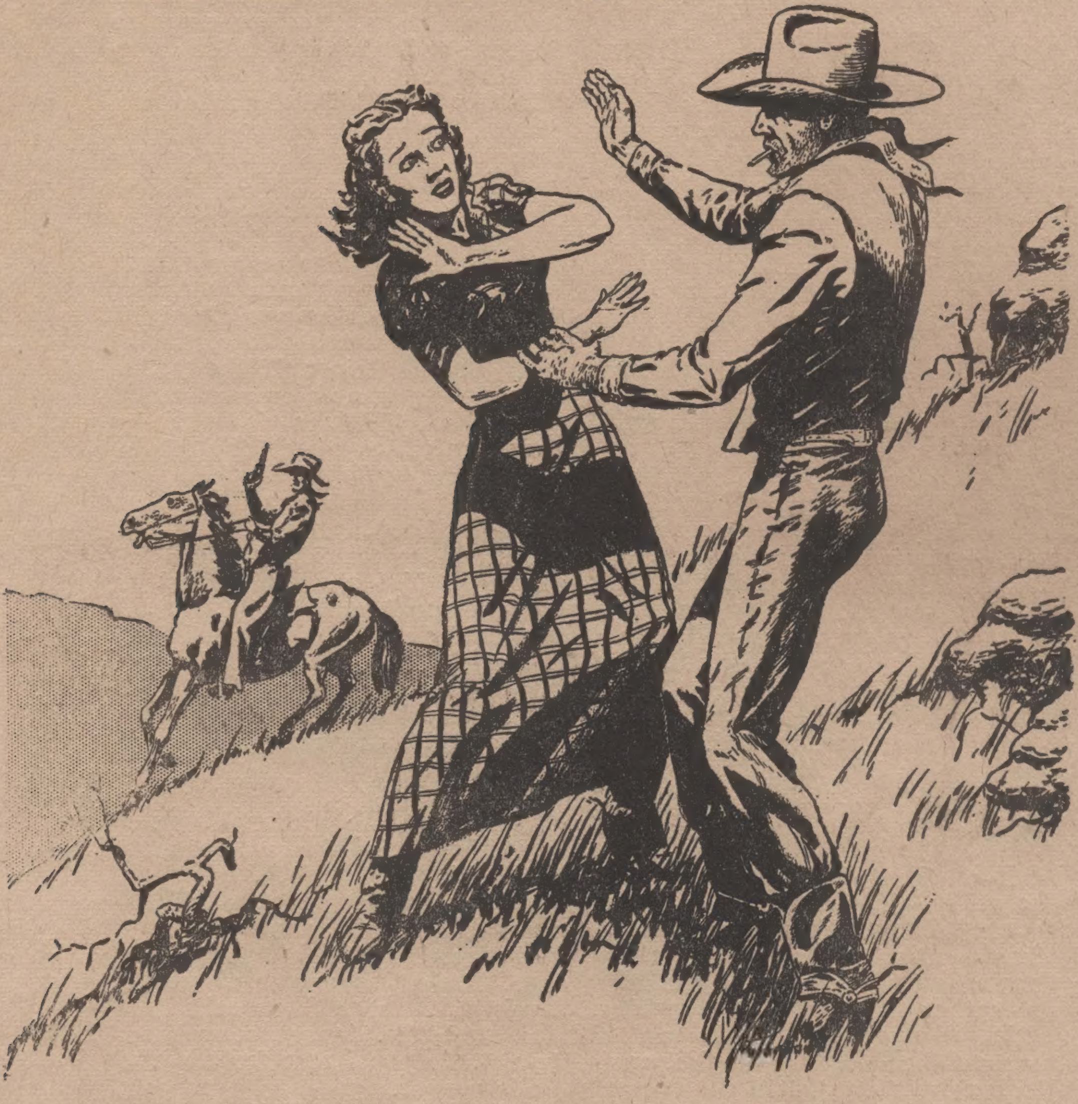

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"Easy. Floppy Ears is a mite gun shy and the way you're wavin' that thing around . . ."

"Then turn him the other way and get lost," the girl said.

Randon's legs made an imperceptible move and Floppy Ears made instant response. He leaped forward, but just as he reached the small figure he turned aside. The gun exploded with a sullen roar and Randon's hat flew out into space. Then he was reaching across the saddle and the .44 was in his hand. And with a movement lithe as a cat's, he was out of the saddle and confronting her. She stepped away from him and the huge stallion that was following at the man's heels.

"Little girls should play with nicer toys," Randon said gently.

Her breath came hard and sharp through the dilated nostrils, and her breast rose and fell as though it would burst through the thin gingham. But these were not signs of fright. Not when he saw the wild look of fury in her lovely eyes. She could have strangled him, so great was her anger.

"Git out of here! I don't want any more of your kind around. There's been enough trouble. All we want's to be left alone . . ." The words came hard and fast from her.

Randon looked past her to where the road curved and went down into the valley which showed green and brown in great checkered squares. There was land fit for a king below. Grazing country, rich with the feed for cattle. He could see the blue glitter of water, enough to feed a thousand head. But in all that vast stretch there was not a single cow, a single horse, and not a single human.

"Look, honey," Randon brought his attention back to her. He suddenly twirled the pistol about so that the butt was now pointing at her. "I was only riding this way because, well, because it looked so pretty. Now you take back this young cannon and let me go . . ."

Her eyes went wide as he reached forward with the gun. It was evident the gesture was unexpected. But as he continued to hold the gun out she brought her hand up, though hesitantly, and took it from him.

"Sorry, mister," she said. "Guess I made a mistake. Saw you come up the road and mistook you for someone else . . ."

Randon lifted his Stetson from the ground. His head swiveled from her figure to right and left where on one side, the Mosite Range lifted its sawteeth to the sky, and on the other, the long sweep of mesa was a mottled pattern of smoke-blue and grey evenly dividing the earth and sky. Ahead, Randon knew was the town of Wrightwood. He had someone to see in the town, Sheriff Gaines. If the matter on which he was riding was not so urgent he would have gladly tarried . . . His head went back of a sudden and the lines of his face stiffened as his ears caught the sound of approaching hoof beats.

The girl too caught the sound. Her eyes sent him a message, but he couldn't read it. Then the thunder was close and a group of men, led by a theatrical figure in pale-blue shirt and trousers to match came to a dust-clouded halt almost at their feet. There were five men in the group, all armed.

THE leader leaped from his mount and stepped forward, a broad grin on his thin mouth. He was a handsome-looking man with dark clean-cut features, a slender figure up to his chest which was wide and deep. There was an air about him which told Randon the man knew he was handsome. Arrogance and vanity rode an equal race for the blue-clad stranger.

"Well. Sally Hurst. A pleasure Miss Sally . . ." the man said in greeting.

And the girl became a tigress at the words. The gun went up in a gesture more swift than Randon thought possible in such a chit of a woman, and her finger tightened on the trigger. But the hammer did not reach its goal. Randon's hand swept down and closed on it. He pulled the .44 from her hand and said:

"Now that's not the way to be, miss."

But her mood had changed for the worse with his action. She stepped forward and slapped him with all her strength. His head snapped back at the impact of her fingers, then came forward again. His face burned in a quick flush, obliterating the marks of her fingers on the skin. Laughter went up at the girl's blow. Only Randon and the leader of the group did not laugh.

"Thanks, mister," the dark-faced man said. "Reckon you saved my life. Sally kin be a mite nasty at times."

"So Sally kin be nasty at times," the girl mimiced him. "I'm only sorry that Mister Buttinsky stopped me, Flash White! I'd have got you, sure as you're standin' there. And I will someday, too."

What happened then was certainly not what Randon expected. White stepped forward and slapped the girl viciously across the face! She was staggered by the blow and a thin red stream suddenly slipped from one nostril. And Randon went into action. His hand, the .44 swinging at the end of it, came up and whipped across the dark face in a lightning-like blow. White went down as though he'd been kicked by a mule. The others went into action then. They converged on Randon from all sides and though he knew the gun in his hand would have stopped them he could not use it. A wild shot might hit the girl. But he could and did use it as a club.

The odds were too great.

A gun barrel caught him high on the side of the head, staggering him, a fist smashed him full in the mouth; he went down swinging at bellies, faces, legs, whatever was in his path. But someone got in a last blow with a gun butt and Randon lay still at last, blood pouring from mouth, nose and cheek, where a gun sight had ripped the flesh.

Three of them, all with the marks of battle on them, stood looking down at the unconscious man. The fourth helped Flash White to his feet. White staggered a bit as he walked forward and looked down at Randon. Then he drew his booted foot back and kicked the other in the ribs three times. Randon's body rolled woodenly with each kick, and more blood flowed from his wounds as he rolled back to his back each time.

White then turned to the girl, who was standing, one hand pressed to her lips, her eyes wide in horror, and said:

"I'm gettin' tired of you and your brother. Keep him out of my way. An' tell this guy when he comes to, to get out of this country. Next time I see him I'll kill him . . ."

RANDON groaned and opened his eyes. He said, "Ouch," as pain stabbed his side. Then he was too speechless to say anything else. He was in the saddle of a horse, a strange one, and pressed close to him he could feel the warmth and curves of a woman's body. He recognized the clip-clop of Floppy Ear's hooves behind them. A warm breath fanned his right ear as a voice whispered:

"All right now, mister?"

It all came back in a flood of memory to him then. The fight and the beating he took. He knew now where he was. And who was behind him. He turned his head and looked into grey-green eyes staring with bright intensity into his. Encrusted blood formed a small scab under one of her nostrils. Randon sniffed back the trickle of blood which insisted on coming out of his own nose and said:

"Do me a favor, honey. Reach into my right hip pocket and drag out the handkerchief there and give it to me. And hold up. I'm okay now and Floppy Ears is probably worried."

She did as he asked and waited until he had mounted his own horse. He rode level with her and nodded for her to continue. They reached a narrow curve and went around it and Randon saw then what had been hidden from sight before. Down below, at the end of the spiral of what was evidently a fork of the road they were on, stood a group of buildings.

"Where we live," she said shortly without looking at him. "We'll be comin' to the fork soon. Wrightwood's straight ahead . . ."

"We?" Randon asked in an idle tone.

"Brother and me."

"Oh! Looks like you had a fire down there . . .?"

"Yeah!" her voice bit the word off sharply. "Couple of coyotes sneaked up in the night and set it off."

"Uh, huh! Could be one of them was called Flash White?" Randon sounded noncommittal.

"Could be . . ."

"Look, Miss Hurst. Mind if I ride down with you? My face feels like it could stand some soap and water. And if you have some tape . . .?"

Instantly she was contrite:

"Oh! I'm such a goon! You're hurt and I forgot. 'Course you can. I won't hear otherwise. Just follow me . . ."

Randon acted like he was blind but his eyes missed nothing. The place didn't look run-down, but rather misused. It was as if the house, barn, and equipment had been made of the finest materials, and then had been forgotten. Randon got a peep through the partly opened barn door as they passed it and saw that not a single horse was stabled within the huge interior.

Sally motioned toward the rear of the house as she stepped through a side entrance. There was a long bench fronting the rear wall. Floppy Ears was well-trained. He waited patiently. In a moment Sally appeared with a basin, a bar of soap and some adhesive tape. Randon removed his shirt and gave himself a thorough washing while the girl watched the play of his muscles with an admiring glance. He was drying himself when she let out a startled sound. He paused with a towel lifted to his face and watched in wonderment as she dashed into the house.

He grinned at her sheepish explanation, as she called him into the house:

"Been so long since we've had people call here—plumb forgot to be polite. Isn't much. But set and feed . . ."

There were two plates on the table which bore a clean cloth. Randon's eyes missed nothing. The house was neat as a pin, though evidently not furnished as well as places he'd seen. A pot of coffee simmered on the stove and the aroma of the stew sent a flow of saliva into his mouth. The meal was nothing but ham and eggs, yet somehow achieved a satisfaction more sumptuous repasts had failed to do.

She sat across from him and grinned into his eyes as he wolfed the food down.

She had set the second cup of coffee before him when the sound of a horse broke the peace of the meal. Her head came up and a thoughtful look came into her eyes. Then, as she recognized the sound, a smile broke.

"That must be Ted," she said. "I'd better set another place."

RANDON'S hearing, acute as an animal's, noticed that Ted had stopped after getting around to the rear. He had evidently spotted Floppy Ears. Now the steps were less buoyant, more cautious, as they moved around toward the entrance. Randon looked over his shoulder and saw a shadow darken the doorway. He thought what a fine warning that would be for another, were conditions otherwise. Then a figure showed with startling suddeness in the doorway.

The girl leaped to her feet and ran to the man in the doorway and threw her arms about the slender waist. She drew him toward Randon, chattering as she did:

". . . Ted. This is Mister—mister . . . Gosh! I don't even know his name, Ted . . ."

"Yeah," the youngster said obliquely. "Still takin' in strays, eh, sis?"

There was insult in the words, and the girl felt the undertone of menace. Her grasp tightened about the waist and she turned the boy about until he was facing her.

"Now look, Ted!" she said firmly. "Don't get on your high horse. This man saved me from trouble and got himself knocked around from Flash White for it. So mind your manners and set to the table and fill your face while I tell you 'bout it."

Randon saw, when Ted took the seat to his right, that the brother was little more than a youth. Ted couldn't have been more than twenty. But in these hills boys became men overnight. It was a hard land, despite the look of fruitfulness, for men had to work the soil, and look after the cattle. Schooling ended quickly here and living began from the time a youngster could fork a horse.

There was a troubled, yet oddly sullen look in Ted's eyes. Randon caught it before the other bent over the plate and began a wolfish mouthing of the food. The girl, however, seemed completely unaware of what was going on. She chattered on anything and everything, telling in great detail, what had happened between her and Randon and between Randon and White.

". . . And," she said, as though in conclusion, "here I act horribly like a brat with Mister . . ."

"Randon, Ward Randon," Randon said, smiling broadly.

". . . Randon. Isn't that terrible, Ted?"

The boy mumbled something.

"But that isn't as terrible as losing your gun, is it, Ted?" she asked in a suddenly strained voice.

SHARP AS Randon's prying glance had been he hadn't noticed the empty holster. She had though. Ted almost choked at the words. The two waited until he had swallowed the last of the food, Randon, coldly curious, the girl, with ill-concealed impatience.

"I—I met Flash too," Ted said, his eyes refusing to meet hers. He was miserable in the thought of what had happened. But she was too demanding to be refused. He continued: "I guess I was careless. Heck! Everybody hereabouts knows Red's windbroke and I guess they heard us comin' a mile off. Anyways, I get to the cottonwoods over by Lister's, and Flash and his boys are waitin' for me.

"I didn't have a chance, Sally. They took my gun from me, and Flash made me get off Red, and then he booted me and said he was givin' me a chance because of you. I was so sick I—I . . ."

She guessed what he had done that he couldn't finish. Instantly she was around the table and to him, burying his head in her arms and mothering him as though he were a five-year old instead of a man. Yet it somehow did not look incongruous to Randon.

"Y'know, son," Randon said. "That happens to the best of men. And sometimes it's a favor done when it happens. Believe me. I don't like guns. Oh, I carry them in my saddle bags. But shucks, if a man don't carry it in the open, nobody's gonna pick a fight with him. Does that make sense to you?"

"It does to me!" It was the girl who answered. "And I wish it did to Ted . . ."

"Aaw, sis," Ted spoke from the depths of a miserable heart. "I know it ain't doin' any good to carry a gun. But we just can't let Flash take this place without a fight for it."

"We're wrong, though," Sally said. "Not in not fightin' for it. But better to lose it then lose you . . ."

"Look, kids," Randon broke in. "Just what happened here that all this is going on?"

He was told then. The whole sordid story. It was not so much a story of ill-luck, but rather a story of a man who simply had not been fitted by nature or temperament to be a rancher or cattle breeder. The mother had died soon after Ted's birth and the burden of raising the boy had been thrown on first the father, then Sally. He had grown wild and free.

Worse, Ed Hurst was an easy-going man who had few worries, and though things might not go well he always thought better days were just around a corner. So that when the cattle began to disappear, when Flash White first came with his suggestions that the two men ought to pool interests, Hurst fell easy prey. The first thing White did was to put his own men at work. It was strange, but immediately after, the cattle simply melted from the range. The last straw came when White asked to buy the ranch at a ridiculous price. Hurst refused. Three days later he was found dead, shot through the back of the head.

There was an investigation of course. Nothing came of it. Sheriff Gaines had told the sister and brother that he would do all in his power to catch the man or men who did it. The death of the father was the forerunner of more trouble, trouble which was capped by a fire to the feed barn. Luckily, there was no wind that night, and though the barn went, nothing else caught fire.

The next day White came around and asked again to buy the property. When Sally refused he made an oblique reference to more trouble. That was the reason Sally had decided to get White. She had actually gone out to meet him, knowing he was to come the next day. What she didn't know was that Ted had also made his mind up to the same thing.

Sally finished the story and after a last pat at Ted's hair, turned and went back to her chair. Randon looked thoughtful for a few seconds. Then, after a shake of his head, he arose and said:

"Well, Sally, Ted. Thanks for the feed and the fixtures." His hand went to the strip of adhesive tape. "I'll be riding along now. Got something to attend to in Wrightwood. But if you don't mind, I'll come back . . ."

"Why?" Sally asked.

"H'mm! A proper question. It deserves a proper answer. I'd like to see this Mister White again. I'm sure he'll be back. Maybe this time I'll be wearing the stuff I have in my saddle bags . . ."

Ted's eyes widened. He didn't know why he felt the odd thrill which raced down his spine at the words, but suddenly he felt as though things were going to be right again at the ranch. But Sally's eyes were troubled, even though she did not refuse Randon.

SHERIFF GAINES was heavy in more ways that just his weight. He leaned back in the swivel chair, which creaked loudly in protest, and looked up through narrowed eyes at the rangy man in the dark clothes. Gaines wore an old-fashioned walrus moustache, a shirt a size too small and a pair of steel-rimmed glasses. His huge belly hid his trousers and boots. His thick bloodless lips made smacking sounds, preliminary to speech:

". . . So you met Flash White," he said. "Nice feller. Couple more like him and the Vigilantes would come back. A snake that a rattler would steer clear of. But a smart snake.

"Yep! I'd have given my last dollar effen I could have pinned Ed Hurst's murder on him. But there was nothing I could do. He had an air-tight alibi."

"I gather White is a shrewd hombre," Randon broke in. "But even the smartest of them slip. Now, I got a lot of information from the kids, but there are a couple of things I'd like to know. For one, why is White so anxious to get hold of the property? And for another, how bad has rustling been in this district?"

"Wa'al," Gaines drawled. "I can't say I've got the answers to either of those questions. But I can try. To the first, Hurst had the best grazing land in the whole county and certainly the best water. As to the second, there ain't been no rustling!"

Randon's head snapped up. His forehead creased in a frown at the words.

"No rustling? But what about Hurst's stock?"

"Hurst had no brand on his stock. How can the kids identify their cattle? But we've got to remember the reason why you're here. I feel sure White is connected with that."

Randon folded his arms across his chest and looked thoughtful. He lifted one hand and a finger stroked his lower lip. Then he took the finger away and snapped it against another. He had come to a decision.

"Okay. Then we'll work from this angle. I think I know why White wants the ranch now.

"There's only the backbone of the low range just to the west of Hurst's place which separates Mexico from us. They could drive those cattle up the Mexican side, hold them in some valley or other, and at the proper time bring them across. Now we know where they've got to ship from, Wrightwood. But they're not risking the railroad. So they've got to truck it in or out. That'll be part of your job. The other part will be . . ."

Gaines chuckled deep in his throat when Randon finished with the detail-ing of his plan.

"No wonder you're the top boy," he said as he rose and thrust a hand across the width of the desk. "And don't worry about the kids. Ma and me have more than enough room. Sally's a good kid and so's Ted. Send them over."

RANDON'S whistle broke off sharply as he reached the slope leading to the ranch house. Floppy Ears came to a dead halt at the tiny pressure of his rider's hands. Randon didn't know what or even if there was anything wrong. It was just a feeling. Yet it was as if someone had stepped to his side and whispered, go no farther. Subconsciously Randon's fingers slipped to the holsters strapped to his hips and felt for the .45's there. Then his knees urged Floppy Ears forward again. The moon, high in the sky and directly overhead, showed every tree, bush, and place of concealment. The night wind, cool on these mountain heights, brought to Randon's senses, an odor familiar as that of bacon and eggs. There were cattle below!

He could see the Hurst ranch house now. There were lights in two of the rooms. There were two courses open to Randon; one, he could ride back to Wrightwood and get Gaines; the other, he could ride down to the house and take his chances with what he found there. He acted without hesitation.

Floppy Ears, sensitive to his rider's slightest feelings, moved with careful steps down the grassy slope. The deep shadows of a copse of trees loomed ahead. Randon urged his mount toward their shadows. If whoever was running these cattle was at all smart he would have look-outs posted. It didn't pay to take chances.

The shadows welcomed the horse and its rider and sheltered them. It also sheltered others. A horse whinnied, and another echoed the sound. Randon reined Floppy Ears up sharply. But his presence was known. The night shadows were punctured by orange flame and the booming sound of rifle fire. Lead whistled through the leaves. But only twice. Then a voice shouted:

"Stop! Don't move, stranger . . ."

As luck would have it Randon at that very instant was not in the deepest part of the shadows but in a place where the moon had broken through, and was outlined fairly well to whoever lay in wait. He lifted his arms skyward and waited for developments. They were not long in coming.

Three men rode out of the shadows toward him. They were all armed and had their rifles trained on him. Those rifles urged him forward in a language which brooked no denial. Two of the men closed in at the sides while the third rode in the rear.

They passed a herd of cattle huddled together as though in self-protection. A hundred yards further another herd moved in restless swirls of animal bodies. Randon noticed but a single herder for each of the pools of cattle. He marked it in his mind for the future.

There were four horses tied to the rail at the rear of the house. Randon and his guards dismounted and while one of the men tied the horses to the hitch-rail, the other two marched Randon through the side door.

"Well look who's here," a voice bellowed jovially.

Randon's eyes swept the room, and with that single glance his plan was resolved for him. The door behind was still open. Turning his head Randon whistled shrilly. And immediately the sound of a horse's high scream of anger rose on the air. Randon smiled at the answering bellow. It was going to take more than the one man left outside to hold Floppy Ears. . .

He turned his head and grunted in pain as a fist crashed into the side of his jaw. Another blow took him in the pit of his stomach. And as he fell forward a boot found its mark just below his right ear. Randon sank into a whirlpool of black water . . .

A WOMAN was screaming . . . There were men's voices raised in laughter. Then a shot . . . Randon rolled to his right; it took all his will power to get to his feet, but somehow he managed. His vision wasn't clear and his legs were rubbery and pain marched back and forth across his face and belly. But he was on his feet, bent slightly forward at the knees, swaying from side to side, trying to make his mind function. Then the pain-mist cleared from in front of his eyes and the scene was plain.

Five men stood looking at a sixth bent over the figure of a girl. On the floor Ted Hurst heaved in a welter of blood. Nobody was paying any attention to Randon. They were laughing and calling for Flash White to continue his fun with Sally. The girl was silent now, struggling with a terrible and somehow futile terror at the hands pawing at her. But of them all the face of White stood out most clearly.

All the evil of man's nature, all the lust, all the ego, stood out boldly and undeniably on his savagely concentrating features. Randon's hands fell to his sides. The flesh on the under side of the wrists brushed against the cold steel of his trigger guards. The leaden feeling disappeared from his hands at the welcome touch. They had knocked him out and had forgotten him in the game White had begun with Sally. But now the game was no longer that. For as Sally fought back with tearing nails and threshing knees, White began a more earnest and fearsome play.

One of the bearded men turned at that instant, his head shaking at the lust of his leader, and saw Randon. His howl of discovery made the others turn also. They were a little late. For the first time in his life, for the first time in his years with the government forces, Randon shot in cold blood.

Four shots spewed from the guns which leaped from their leather scabbards with the speed of striking lightning. And four men died! But though he was swift, he could not cover them all. Nor did he imagine that White would do what he did, whirl Sally about so that she was the target. Randon's right hand swiveled toward White, but as he saw Sally's young body interposed between him and his target he hesitated. That instant of hesitation proved his undoing. Flame spat from the corner where the sixth man had scurried when the shooting began. A torch of pain was plunged into Randon's chest just below his left shoulder. The force of the bullet staggered Randon backward and numbed his whole left side, making him drop the .45 in his left hand.

In a flash White hurled Sally to one side and went for the guns in his holsters. At the same time the man in the corner fired again and again the torch struck deep into Randon, this time low and close to his hip. It caught him as he staggered and almost knocked him to the floor from the shock. It also saved his life.

For White let loose with a blast from his guns. The shots found their mark, but not in Randon. Randon's back had been to the door. The bullets had knocked him sideways and away from the door. And just as he staggered, the seventh man leaped through the door. And right into the shots White let loose. He screamed once before death took him.

RANDON fired now blindly, wildly, aiming in the general direction of the men in the corner, trying to recover his balance, trying to stand erect by sheer will power. The thunder of exploding .45's rocked the walls. But louder than the rest was the boom of an old Sharpes. Only Randon's vision seemed to work. The rest of his body didn't seem to belong to him. But he could see.

He saw Sally, her back against the far wall. In her arms was the rifle which had hung on two pegs before. From its muzzle a sharp bright orange flame broke in a thunder of sound. Randon's head swiveled toward the man in the corner. He was down on his knees, his face turned toward the girl. That is, what was left of his face. One of the shots had taken him full in the forehead and had torn the whole top of his head off.

Randon wondered idly what had happened to White. He looked up and saw that White was facing the girl, a smile on his face, the .45's pointing toward her.

Randon wondered how he had gotten to the floor. He was conscious of the blood in which he sat. It was like a crimson bed sheet which covered his legs completely. His head came up at the sound of a pistol's bark. He was just in time to see White step toward the girl. She was swaying as though before a faint. The Sharpes lay at her feet where the pistol bullet had knocked it from her hand. Now White threw his guns away. His steps moved inexorably toward her and as he came forward she retreated until her back came against the wall.

Randon tried for the gun which had fallen by his right knee. But his hand refused its function, and when it finally did get there the fingers had no grip. He could do nothing but watch . . .

He didn't hear the last shot. He only saw White suddenly stagger, saw him slowly turn, his face toward someone in the center of the room. Then his lips twisted and fell open and a torrent poured from them, before his knees gave and he sank to the floor.

Randon tried to control the grin but he couldn't. It sagged his jaw until he looked like an idiot, as he also turned toward where White had looked. For what he saw was Ted, seated cross-legged, a .45 held in both hands. Smoke still curled from it. Laughter bubbled on Randon's lips . . . And again the black whirlpool took him.

"YOU WERE mighty lucky," Gaines said.

Randon grimaced with pain as he rolled slightly to look at Sally Hurst, looking for all the world like a school girl in the new gingham dress she wore. She stepped to his side and forced his head down gently. Randon grinned at her and said:

"I knew Floppy Ears would head back to town. It was a question how long I could manage . . . How's Ted, Sally?"

"He'll be all right. The shot glanced from one of his ribs."

"A lucky thing for all of us," Randon said.

But the sheriff had other things on his mind.

"You were right, Randon. Those cattle were Mexican. We found the truckers and White's warehouse. He was doing a good business. After all, the Mexican government was paying those ranchers to destroy the cattle. So they were collecting two ways. White bought cheap and sold dear. Tainted cattle. Funny thing, though. There was about three hundred head that didn't have the disease."

"No? Now whom do you think they belonged to?" Randon asked.

"Sally and Ted Hurst, naturally," the sheriff said, grinning. He turned and left the room.

Randon looked up into those beautiful eyes bent close to his. A feeling of warmth stole through him.

"Sally . . ."

"Yes, dear?"

"I've been a wanderer a long time. Now I'd like to rest. I'm a Federal marshall . . ."

"I know, dear," Sally said as she placed a hand against his lips. "The sheriff told us. But now you've got to rest."

"For how long, Sally?"

"For as long as you want."

"Forever then," Randon replied.

There was no need for Sally to say anything more. Her eyes and lips did the rest . . .

STAMPEDING BUFFALO HERDS

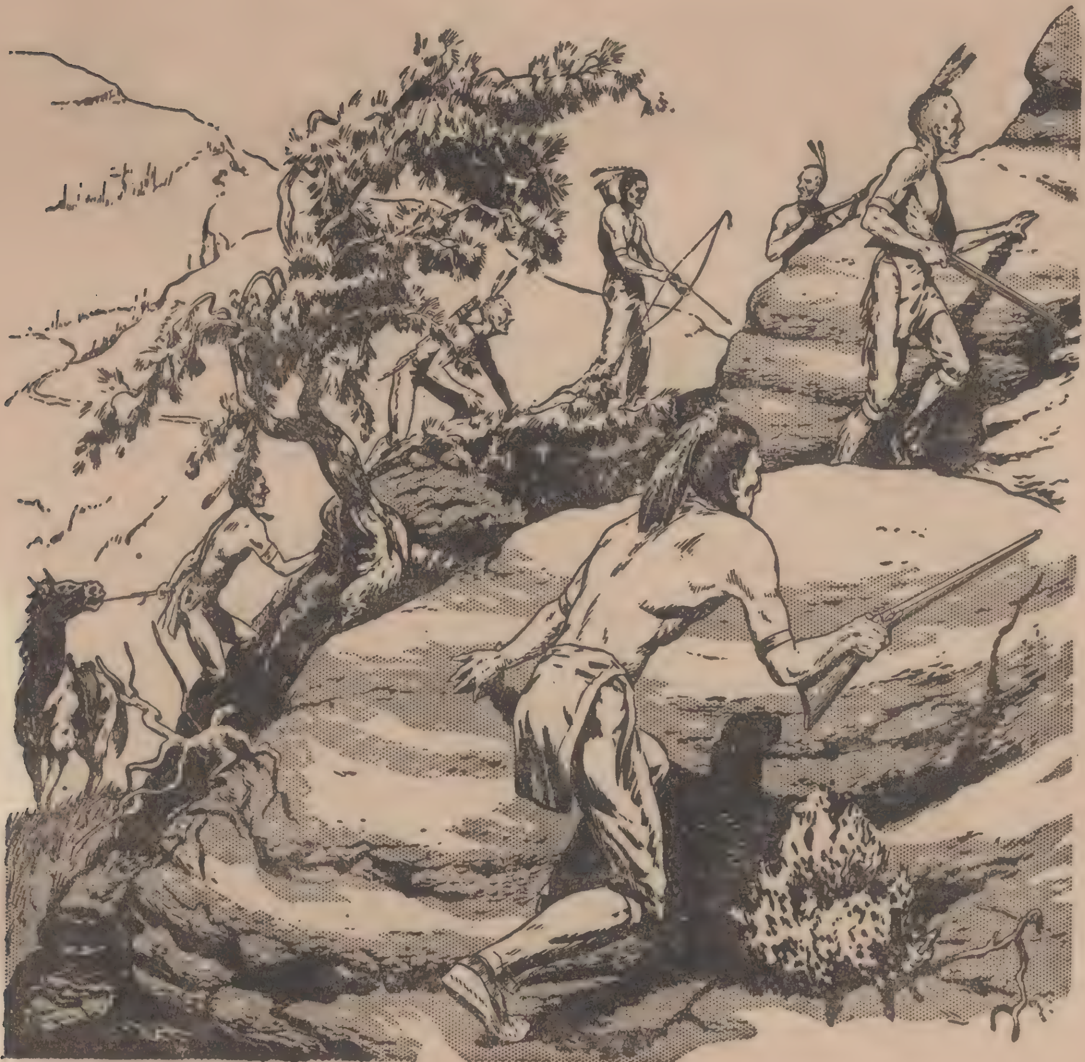
BY H. R. STANTON

A GROUP of early explorers traveling to California marveled at the enormous herds of buffaloes that roamed the Western plains. One narrator of the expedition said that he saw more buffalo in one day than he had ever seen cattle in all his life. The plains were black with them as far as the eye could see for several days journey. One night when they were camping on the south fork of the Platte they had to sit up all night and fire guns and keep fires to keep the buffalo from trampling them in the dust. The ground trembled and the sound of their hoofs was like a continuous roll of thunder. If they could not be turned away, the emigrants, wagons, and animals would have been trodden under their racing feet.

THE DANCING DUTCHMAN

by *Frances M. Deegan*

Luke Gamble knew that the Indians had the white party trapped—and he also knew that the crazy Dutchman was their one hope of living . . .



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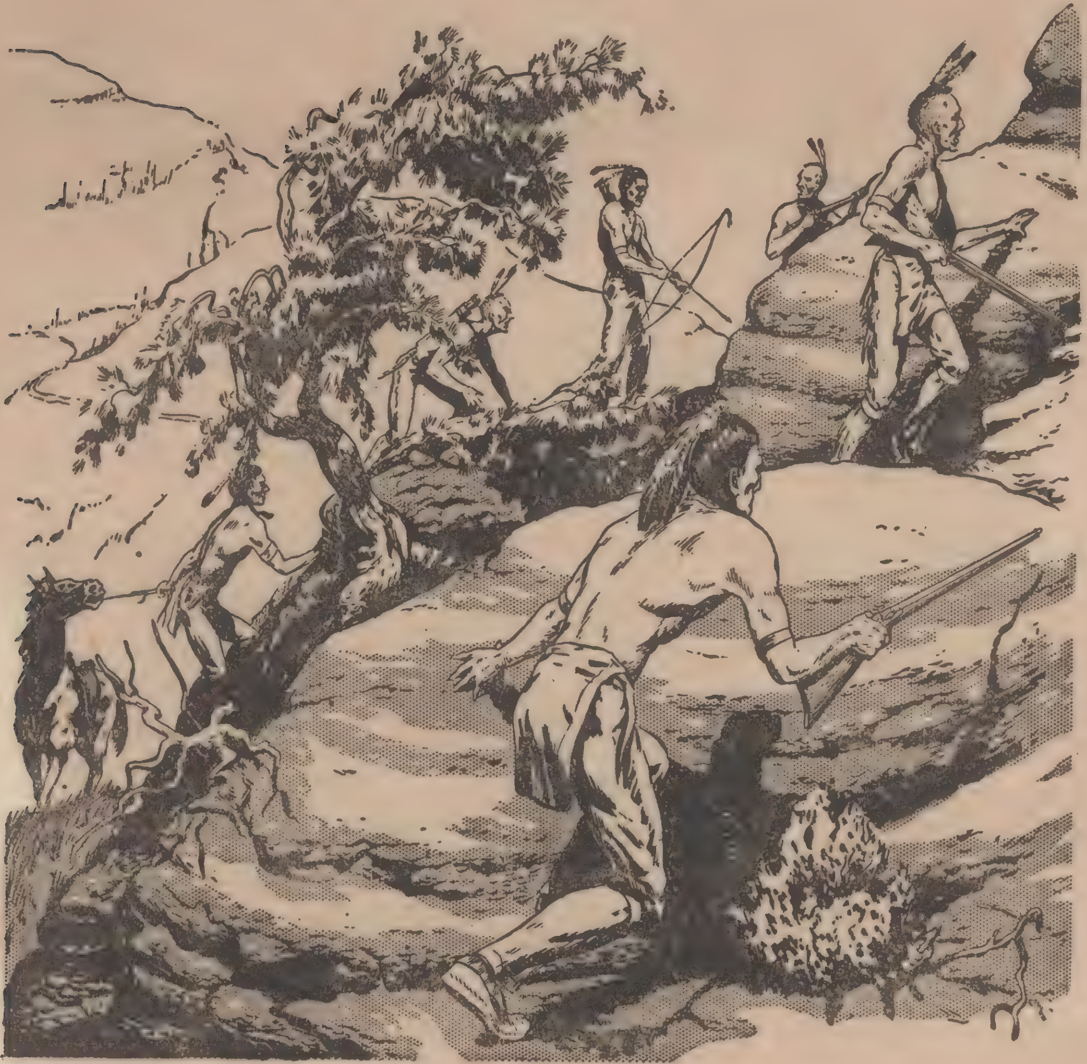
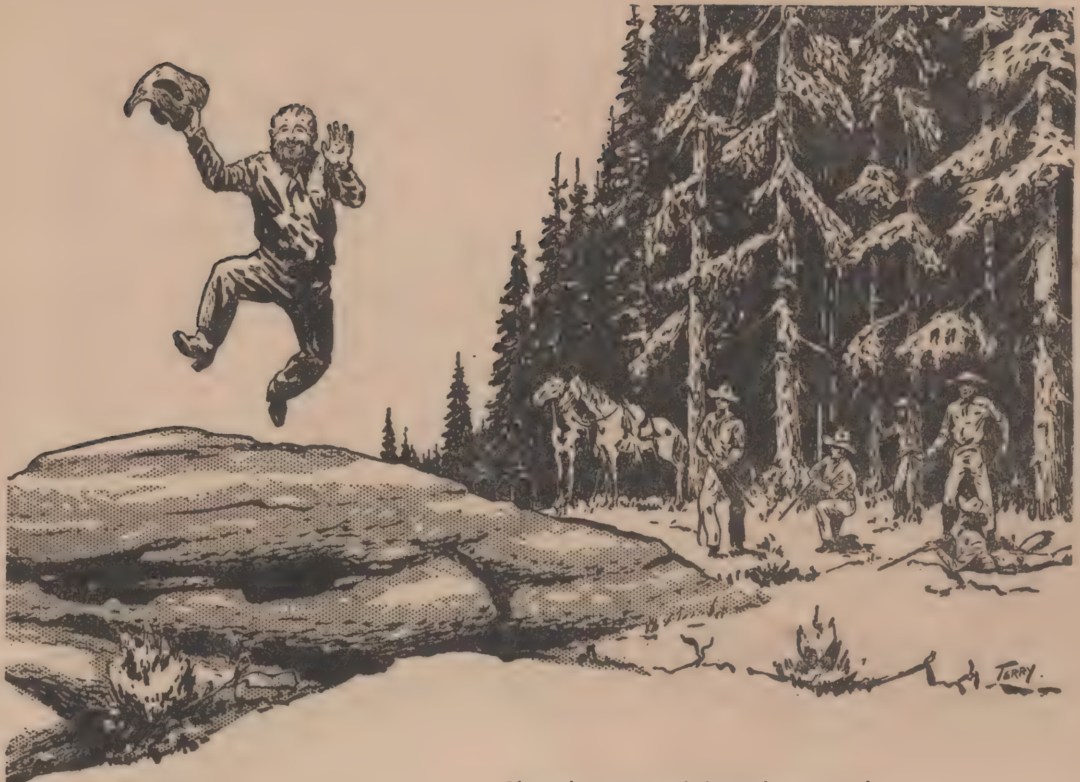




The Indians stopped their advance up the slope as the Dutchman suddenly appeared on the rocks above them, dancing wildly

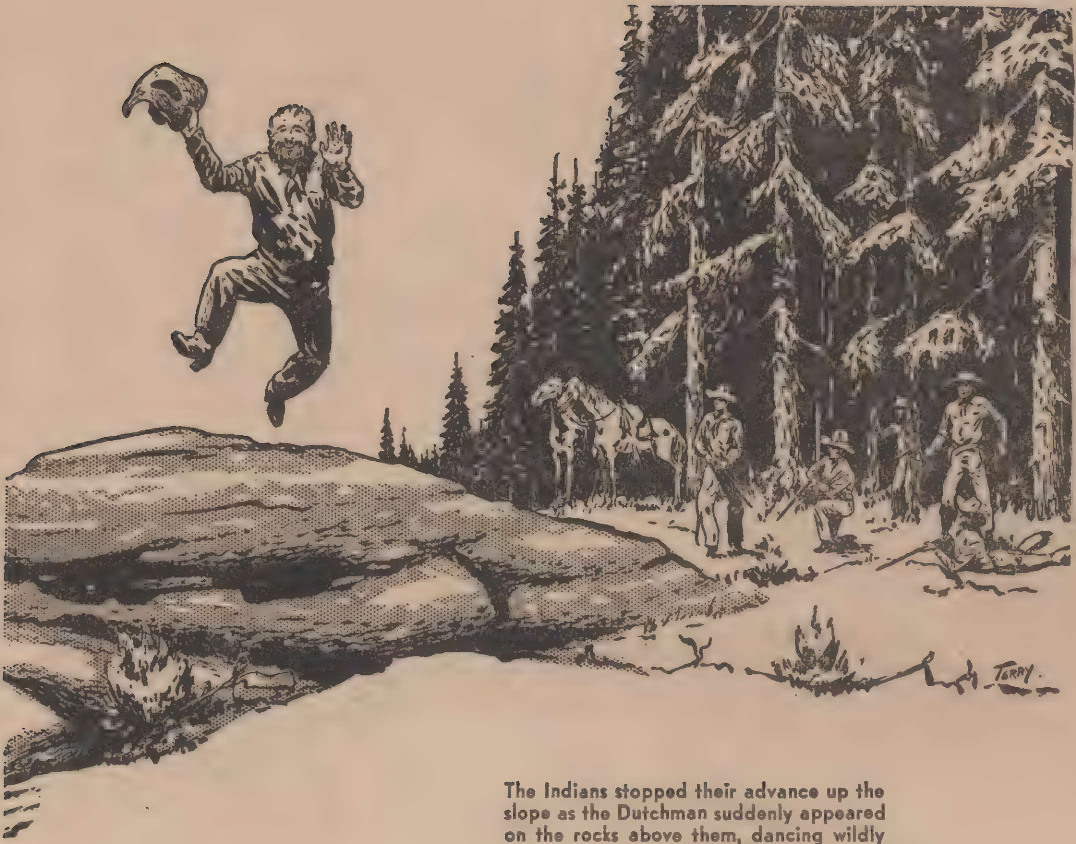
LUKE GAMBLE was long, lean and deliberate. He was hawk-nosed and brown as an Indian, with the same stoic calm, until he was roused to action and then he moved like greased lightning. But this did not happen often.

As a civilian scout attached to Colonel Carrington's forces that summer of 1866 when the Bozeman Trail was being opened across the Sioux country, his duties consisted mainly in listening to the opinions and complaints of various outspoken individuals who had little or no idea of the swift and deadly art of Sioux warfare. He listened with bland attentiveness, repeated the routine warning, and went on about his business of carefully preserving his own scalp.

To Luke and the few other civilian employees of the Army, the situation was plain. Red Cloud was mad at the Army. Red Cloud was a powerful Sioux Chief. Therefore, the Sioux were mad at the Army and any one else who tried to use the Bozeman Trail, especially that part of it above Fort Reno on the Powder River.

Red Cloud had said it: "You may come as far as Fort Reno, and no farther. All beyond is Sioux hunting ground, the last of the great Sioux country. If you take that, my people will starve. You shall not pass!"

It was as simple as that. Red Cloud meant what he said. But the Indians did not fight like white men. They did not draw up their forces in battle lines across the Bozeman Trail, and issue a formal ultimatum. There were plenty of Indians to do it, more than three thousand against the little handful of Carrington's regulars, but the Sioux were rugged individualists. Their war was hit and run style, counting *coup* was a matter of personal triumph. There was no satisfaction in winning a quick victory with an army of superior force, whereas it took daring and bravery to raid a well armed camp and come away with



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Luke Gamble could have told them what the Indian war was leading to, but the mountain scouts were notorious tellers of tall tales and nobody would have listened seriously. Instead, Luke was forced to listen to people like John Seeman, leader of an emigrant train en route from Fort Reno to the site of Carrington's unfinished post on Little Piney Fork, eighty miles north. The HQ post was to be called Fort Phil Kearney when it was finished—a big, modern garrison in the very heart of the Sioux country, designed to keep the trail open to Virginia City and the Montana gold fields, for the benefit of pioneers like John Seeman and his party of twenty-six men, women and children.

The emigrant leader was a stocky, bearded man with a loud voice and authoritative manner. He stood spraddle-legged on the bank of Crazy Woman's Fork and surveyed with satisfaction the loosely corralled wagons and the forty-odd head of horses and mules turned out to graze on the scattered tufts of grass. He was flanked by his two lieutenants, lanky Tim Coleman and stubby, red-headed Harvey Glass, both garbed in ill-fitting homespun and solemnly chewing tobacco in unison.

Kate Roney was there, too, her stringy arms folded across a spare chest, shrewd gray eyes studying Luke under a faded sunbonnet. Kate's man was buried, without his boots, down on the sandy banks of the Platte River, but Kate had not hesitated once the stone marker was in place. She put on his boots and took her place in the train as driver of the four-mule team Roney outfit. Nobody questioned her right to join in the discussion of any given situation.

She said to Luke: "If the Injuns is due to act up, I'd like to get the straight of it. Seeman, here, claims you're jest belly-achin' about Injuns 'cause you wanta be boss an' tell ever'body what to do."

"I'm tellin' you straight," Luke said coldly. "Army instructions. All stock left to graze loose should have a double guard. All wagon corrals should be drawn up tight with no less than four pickets on constant duty. I've seen what the Injuns could do to a camp as wide-open as this 'un."

SEEMAN chuckled. "I don't doubt you fellers made tough goin' when you first come to this country. In them days it paid a man to be cautious, before the Injuns had a taste of the Army an' the civilized way o' doin'. But you fellers seem to fergit them days is over. Me, I wouldn't scare wuth a continental, happen I see a whole troop of Injuns ridin' down on us here. Only time we'll see Injuns is when they come lookin' fer some flour an' sugar an' terbaccy. Otherwise they ain't interested."

"When you don't see 'em is just when they are interested," said Luke, scanning the purple reaches of sagebrush and cactus that surrounded the encampment. "They know every move you make. They're all around you everywhere you go, just waitin' for a chance to strike, day or night. That's why you got to tighten up your corral from here on."

"Oh, Pshaw!" barked tough little Harvey Glass. "You fellers an' your Injun scares! Ever since you made that Gov'ment survey an' reported no gold in these parts, you been tryin' to scare ev'body away. Looks like there might be somethin' real valyble hereabouts—contrary to that there official report. Looks like you might not want nobody else to find it."

"If so be you figger you kin find it without losin' your hair," said Luke, "you're welcome to try."

"There you go!" snapped Seeman. "Always puttin' in a barb about the wild Injuns. It just so happens I know all about that treaty was just made down to Fort Laramie. If the Injuns was on the warpath, would the U. S. Army be crazy enough to send a peaceable expedition up this way with only enough men to build an' man the new post?"

"I ain't sayin' who's crazy," drawled Luke. "All I know is Red Cloud an' the Smoke band of the Sioux never signed no treaty. They went away mad an' put on their war paint. Furthermore, they got a heap of friends, includin' Cheyennes an' Rapahoes. An' it's no secret about what was in them dispatches we just brought down from Colonel Carrington. He reported the Sioux is in a state of war an' asked for reinforcements. But that ain't sayin' when they'll git here."

"Sho! That's just the natchul caution of a Army man. He don't expect no reinforcements by return post. He's jest lookin' ahead to the future when he'll maybe need replacements, an' at the same time pertectin' himself. Like if he should have a couple skirmishes an' have to report some casualties. He can always point to the record an' show how he kept headquarters informed, so if anythin' unforeseen happens he ain't to blame. But right now we got two companies behind us at Reno, an five companies ahead of us at the new post. What fool Injun would dare—Whatsa matter?"

Luke picked up his rifle and stalked away toward a patch of sagebrush at the far edge of the camp, and suddenly a woman screamed shrilly and repeatedly. After a stunned moment the whole camp burst into a confused uproar and men ran shouting and seeing nothing in the dusk. Their frenzy spread to the horses and mules and the milling herd added to the aimless confusion. Luke circled the melee quietly, keeping his eye on the deeper shadow that lay prone under the sage. But the shadow did not move and when Luke brushed the sage back with the rifle barrel, he looked down on a terrified little man whose wild, blue eyes stared out of a matted growth of hair and beard. His clothes were in rags and the exposed skin was sun-blackened and crusted with old grime and sweat. He was unarmed but clutching two well-filled bullet pouches from which the beadwork was almost, but not quite, obliterated.

"I reckon you kin git up now," Luke said. "An' state your business, if any."

"Nein, nein!" the man croaked. "I tell you nothing."

"Git up!" Luke prodded the quivering buttocks with the rifle. "On your pins, Mister, an' speak your piece. How come you to be wanderin' around this country alone without gettin' scalped?"

"Ja, ja!" He scrambled away from the rifle and crouched against the wiry sagebrush, still clutching the bullet pouches. "Dey was all by der Injuns ge-scalped. All mine friends. Seven of us der was. Now is only me alone. I don't tell you no more. Who is der captain here?"

"I reckon I'll do," Luke drawled. "Luke Gamble, that's me. Civilian scout attached to the 2nd Batallion, 18th U. S. Infantry. Right now I'm guidin' John Seeman's party as fur as District Headquarters on Little Piney Fork. If so be you're of a mind to come along with us, I reckon I'll have to ask you to give an account of yourself fust."

"Himmel! Always you Americaners got to be in such a big hurry to get suspicious." The intensely blue eyes darted frantically over the broiling camp. "You see I am alone, not so? I haf no guns—"

"What's in them pouches?"

"Blease!" He licked his cracked lips. "If I could haf a drink water, und maybe a little something to eat . . ."

LUKE caught sight of John Seeman running toward them with Coleman and Glass at his heels, and stepped back out of line of their guns, revealing the cringing Dutchman. They came to a halt and glared angrily at Luke and his captive as other members of the party followed more cautiously.

"Blast you an' your mysterious monkey-shines!" Seeman bawled at Luke. "You've set the whole camp crazy with your Injun stalkin'."

"Not me," said Luke dryly. "You'd ought to tell the ladies they shouldn't go too far away from camp whenever they want to pick some wild flowers. No tellin' what they'll meet up with out here."

"Is this what all the rumpus was bout?" demanded lanky Tim Coleman. "Who is the feller?"

Luke said, "He's a Dutchman, been prospectin' the Black Hills northeast of here. Claims there was seven in the party. Only the rest of 'em all lost their hair."

"Nein! Nein!" screamed the Dutchman as the men crowded closer. "In the Big Horns to the west we was. All ge-scalped. All mine friends. Blease, I don't make no trouble. Just to get back to der States. Dot's all I am asking."

"How come you to place this feller way up in the Black Hills," Seeman asked accusingly, "when he says he was right here in the Big Horns where you don't want nobody to go?"

"Feller's a little crazy, if you ask me," Luke replied. "If him an' his party did get over into the Big Horns, they had no business there, an' maybe the Injuns did wipe 'em out like he says—all but him. But they come from up along the Belle Fourche in the Black Hills. That's where he got them two pouches. From a band of Cheyennes over that way. They was made by the squaw of Chief Little Bear. Them blue an' red crosses is her special pattern. She puts 'em on everythin'—just that way. An' so I figger that whatever he's got in them pouches, that come from over in the Black Hills, too."

"Whatever he's got — Gold!" bellowed Seeman. "Harvey! Tim! Git them pouches!"

The Dutchman screamed and fought like a trapped panther when the two men sprang at him, but he was soon reduced to a naked, blubbering heap of despair and the growing crowd pushed and shouted in an excited knot about the two heavy pouches. Luke stared down at the miserable little Dutchman coldly.

"You," he remarked, "are a sure enough greenhorn. You just don't know how dam-awful lucky you are. You'll git your gold back if you'll quit your lyin' an' tell these fellers where you found it."

The Dutchman lifted an anguished face from the sand. "Ja," he quavered. "I tell. I tell where is much gold. Enough for all. Sticking out of der mountain und running down in der water . . ."

THE NIGHT sky was brilliant above the fragrant glow of sagebrush fires, and the entire camp remained in a state of wakeful excitement as the men wrangled over the Dutchman's gold. Seeman's stock figure bristled with angry determination each time he repeated his arguments against Luke's warnings.

"You all heard what Jacob Klein said!" he shouted. "That gold come from over in the Big Horns, where this official guide don't want us to go. An' why? He claims the Injuns'll git us sure, an' at the same time he admits he don't believe the Dutchman's story about the rest of his party bein' massacred over in the Big Horns. There you are! The feller don't make sense 'cause he ain't tellin' us the truth. He wants to keep the Dutchman's strike fer himself."

"He ain't a-goin' ter do it!" howled red-headed Harvey Glass. "What I say is, let the Dutchman have these here nuggets he already took out, pervidin' he'll guide us to where he found it. It can't be so fur away. Then he kin go back to the States like he wants, an' hit himself some new pardners to work his claim. Why would Klein say the gold come from nearby in the Big Horns, if it didn't? Answer me that, Mr. Luke Almighty Gamble!"

"Because he wants to keep the strike a secret," replied Luke wearily. "He got rid of his own pardners—one way or another, an' now he's pointin' in the opposite direction from where his claim is really located. Way I figger it, him an' his party was on their way down to Fort Laramie from the Black Hills after they made their strike, when his pardners got eliminated. How come all six of them went under, an' he didn't? Only one reason I know of why the Injuns wouldn't bother a lone white man wanderin' around their country unarmed. An' that is if they thought the feller was crazy. Injuns won't harm a crazy person—red, white or black. But they got to have a good reason for thinkin' he's a loony. So I figger the Dutchman done somethin' awful crazy—"

"I had enough o' your figgerin'!" barked Seeman. "Now you're tryin' to account for how the Dutchman come safe through this country you claim is so dangerous. If Jacob Klein could do it alone an' unarmed, ain't no reason a strong party of us couldn't do it. I say let the main party stay here in camp while we take theDutchman over in the Big Horns to locate the strike, then we'll see who's lyin' an' who's crazy. All in favor say Aye!"

"Aye!" roared Coleman and Glass, and the rest of the group joined in a ragged cheer that ended in jeers for Luke.

He remained unperturbed and ran his eyes coldly over the antagonistic faces. He said, "You're makin' an awful mistake, but if you're bound to go in spite of my warnin', you'd best start before daylight."

"We'll start," said Seeman, "when we git damn' good an' ready. I reckon we kin do without your advice on this deal."

"Speak fer yourself, Seeman," rasped Kate Roney. "Me, I'm appointin' Luke Gamble to go along with you an' look after my interests."

LUKE'S NECK stiffened and he glared at the weather-beaten widow across the fire. Her shrewd eyes hardened against his and returned the glare without wavering.

"Sure," she said harshly. "I know how you feel about us women-folk. You'd admire to see us all act like Injun squaws, an' keep our place behind you men. But since I put on my man's boots, I aim to wear 'em like he done. If you ain't of a mind to go fer me, I reckon I'll go myself. It jest seemed more sensible to ask you to go, fer I know if anybody kin git there an' back without gittin' lost, it's you."

"What give you the idea you could trust me?" growled Luke.

"I got you sized up pretty good," retorted Kate tartly. "I figger you won't be likely to be in cahoots with the other men, happen they should git the notion of cheatin' the rest of us outa whatever they find. An' on the other hand, havin' the other men along'll keep you honest, too. You can't tell one story, an' them another."

"I want he should represent Charley an' me, too," spoke up a younger woman. "Charley hadn't ought to go account of his smashed foot, but Luke Gamble is bound to come back here, 'less he wants to get in bad with the Army. This here's his job, guidin' us to Fort Phil Kearney, so he'll pretty near have to bring the other men back, if he wants to or not."

The men around Seeman shuffled their feet uncomfortably as the idea of Luke's usefulness on their trek into unknown country became apparent to them.

"He kin come along if he's a mind to," said Seeman grudgingly.

"Can't think of any reason why I should risk it," declared Luke coolly. "It's my job guidin' this train fur as District Headquarters, sure enough. But that don't include no side trips prospectin' the Big Horns. Accordin' to my instructions, prospectin' trips in this Territory is forbidden."

"Listen at him!" yelled Harvey Glass, ruffling his flaming hair. "I knowed he could think up a good excuse. He don't dast go along an' git showed up for a dash-blank liar!"

"Quit your name-callin', Harvey!" said Kate sharply. "That big mouth o' your'n kin make more trouble than any two women I ever see. An' you, Luke Gamble, ain't it your bounden duty to report any Injun trouble, like if six men gits murdered in this here Territory?"

"I got no sound reason to think they was wiped out by the Injuns in this District," said Luke sullenly. "That Dutchman's a liar, sure enough . . ."

"If you men'd quit callin' each other liar long enough to take some action," snorted Kate, "we might maybe git somewhere. 'Pears to me like the Army might think poorly o' you and Seeman if you don't organize a search party an' investigate the fate o' them six men. An' if so be you should happen across a gold mine in the puhformance o' your duty, ain't nobody like to criticize you fer that."

Luke eyed the widow resentfully. "It takes a woman," he growled, "to reason out why a man should do what he hadn't ought to do. This'll be the fust time I went out an' invited the Injuns to take my scalp."

THE DUTCHMAN had been fed, and clothed in miscellaneous garments that were too large for him, but he was not happy. He looked at Luke with haunted blue eyes.

Luke said, "This is your last chance to tell the truth, Dutchman. We're all set to start for the Big Horns in an hour, an' you're goin' along to locate that spot where you found all that gold layin' around."

"Nein, nein!" gasped the Dutchman. "You could find it vidout me. Blease! I tell you vhere. Look, I make a chart you could follow. All I ask is I should get back mine pounches mit der gold . . ."

"Nope. These fellers ain't goin' to be satisfied with that kind of arrangement. Most of 'em is from Missouri State, an' you got to show 'em. An' even if you could make a good map of that crick you described, I wouldn't need it. I know the way, 'cause I already been there. That's why I'm tellin' you to be smart an' *change your story before it's too late.* Tell these fellers you found the gold up in the Black Hills, an' maybe they won't force you to go back to the Big Horns. Whether they find any gold in that crick or not ain't goin' to matter much. It ain't likely any of us will live to tell the tale. The Injuns'll see to that. You're scared of the Injuns, ain't you?"

"Nein!" The Dutchman shook his tangled mane stubbornly, and walked away, a bandy-legged little man in flopping shirt and patched pants.

Luke watched him take a wavering course between the dying camp fires and turned an inscrutable brown face toward the swearing, straining group of men who were pushing the wagons closer together to tighten the corral. It was not his suggestion which had prompted them, but Kate Roney's insistence, backed by the five other women in the party. Kate strode across the camp and faced Luke belligerently.

"Does that suit ye, Mr. Luke Gamble?" she challenged.

"It don't suit me, but it's better than it was," Luke growled.

"How come you to be takin' ten hosses with only seven men?" the widow asked. "'Pears to me like a man kin ride only one hoss at a time, an' them animals'd be better left here."

"Tain't likely they'd be left long," Luke snapped. "With us gone, the Injuns will most likely run off the whole herd. But if you keep a twenty-four hour guard an' all stay inside the corral, they ain't so apt to attack the camp. Not on their first visit, anyway. Looks like with Seeman gone, an' both Coleman an' Glass with him, you'll pretty much have your say around here. That's if you kin git anybody to listen to you."

"I got some influence with the women," retorted Kate. "I reckon we kin handle the men all right. You jest make it your business to git back here, Mr. Luke Gamble, gold or no gold."

"I aim to," Luke said angrily, and stalked off to saddle his horse.

In spite of his shrill protests, the Dutchman was hoisted roughly aboard a horse, and the horse led off at a reckless gallop in the pre-dawn blackness. The rest of the party followed to the sound of last minute shouts and cheers.

Luke rode at a distance from the group, frowning darkly at their disregard of his suggestion that they leave quietly. The men continued to talk to each other in exuberant shouts as they bore off to the northwest across the barren plain. Harvey Glass was in the lead with the unwilling Dutchman in tow, and he kept assuring the others loudly that the goose that laid the golden egg was still intact. Besides Seeman and Coleman, two of the younger men had been selected to round out the 'rescue' party. Paul Kinsey was a reckless, black-eyed scamp whose talents for trouble-making were well-known to the members of the party. His interests ranged from women to petty larceny, and in the brawls resulting from his activities, his reputation as a good man in a fight had increased with each incident. Herman Black, on the other hand, was a bashful farm boy, but he was a dead shot with his old single-action rifle, and might also be a good man in a fight if he did not lose his nerve.

AT SUNUP Luke was riding along morosely, rifle across his saddle bow, when Tim Coleman loped alongside and said,

"See thet?"

"Uh-huh," replied Luke. "Smoke signal, an' it's right over our trail—that's if we aim to take the easiest way in."

"What other way is there?" asked Coleman diffidently.

Luke turned and looked at the lanky Missourian, and gave him a wolfish grin. He said, "Looks like you, fer one, kinda cooled off since you got started. If you're gittin' leery about that smoke signal, you're dead right. They're layin' fer us at Rim Crick Canyon. But nobody pays any 'tention to me. Maybe you better ask the Dutchman how to git past 'em."

"That's just it!" shouted Coleman indignantly. "He won't tell us nothin'. He just keeps recitin' pomes — anyway, Herman says they're pomes, like whut his grandma used to read out of an old German book."

"Well, then," advised Luke sardonically, "maybe you better all start recitin' pomes, or better yet, prayers. You're sure headin' fer a place where you're goin' to need 'em."

"How do you mean, we're headin' fer it? What are you doin' — turnin' back?"

"Nope. Too late fer that. We got another sizeable party of Injuns behind us. That's who them smoke signals is for. Likely they'll close up fast when we git to Rim Canyon. They'll git us comin' an' goin'. Unless," Luke paused and turned in the saddle to survey the surrounding hills, "unless we choose to hole up an' stand 'em off."

"If we're that bad off," growled Coleman, " 'pears to me like you're takin' it pretty cool."

"Any man that's let a female jaw him into takin' a fool chance like this," observed Luke bitterly, "deserves jest about everything he gits, an' it ain't goin' to help matters none to git excited about it."

"Well, what are ye goin' to do?" demanded Coleman. "Seeman an' them wants to know."

"Me? I'm goin' to hole up after I leave the train in that patch of scrub pine yonder. That's if I kin make it. Anybody wants to come along is welcome—but it ain't goin' to be no picnic."

The Dutchman sang in a cracked voice and Glass slapped him across the mouth with a hard palm. The party rode in a close group and both horses and men were tense with the strain of holding down to a smooth gait, while fear communicated itself from man to beast. Less than five miles behind them a party of twelve Indians followed along at a comfortable gallop.

"Hold back!" Luke warned for the tenth time as Paul Kinsey's horse leaped ahead. "You let the hosses start runnin' now, an' they'll ketch us sure. Wait till I give the signal. Hold back, damn you!"

Kinsey flashed glittering black eyes full of resentment, but held his restive mount down to an uneven canter. The trail skirted the slope where the scrub pine grew, and rounded a blunt projection of solid rock. As the party approached this turn which would hide them from the pursuing Indians, Seeman yelled: "Here they come!" And panic struck the group.

For an instant they were a thrashing tangle of maddened horses and yelling men, then Luke was free and driving his led horse along the trail with slashing blows. The terrified animal disappeared as Luke wheeled, cut loose the extra horse attached to young Black's saddle, and drove the frantic animal after the first. Seeman broke away from the group and spurred after the riderless horses. The pounding thud of the Indian ponies and sharp, barking war whoops could be heard briefly, and then the sounds of pursuit were cut off as the Indians dipped into a ravine. Luke had freed the third led horse and driven it after Seeman, and now lashed out with his rawhide whip, driving the remaining horses straight up the slope into the pines. Once given direction, the men recovered themselves momentarily, and concentrated on getting their horses up the rocky slope.

THE INDIAN yells broke clear of the ravine and the ponies' hooves were pounding the trail when Luke rounded a boulder and entered a narrow passage in the rock formation. The others crowded after him, panting curses and pushing to get ahead of each other. They came out into a shallow cup at the top of the blunt rock projection which made the sharp turn in the trail. The Indian ponies thundered past, following the horses which had gone ahead up the trail.

The men dismounted and stood there looking at each other blankly, surprised at their sudden deliverance. There was a high, shrill scream somewhere up the trail, and Coleman's tobacco stained mouth dropped open as he turned his head slowly in the direction of the hideous sound.

"They got Seeman," he said hoarsely, and all the men looked at Luke who was examining his rifle.

"They'll be back," he said. "Nosin' around fer the rest of us. Look to your guns fust, an' then I want some help closing up that passage. They'll find where we dodged into the pines, but mebbe so if we all keep quiet, they might think we slipped back the way we come. 'Tain't easy, even fer a Injun, to read sign aright where the trail is mostly rock."

The mounting sun turned the shallow cup into a stew pan. The horses stood with drooping heads, moving their tails listlessly to flick at the flies. The men sprawled in a thin margin of shadow at one side, glancing from time to time at the Dutchman who had prostrated himself in the center of the burning cup.

"Feller's crazy as a bedbug," growled Coleman. "We'd ought to knowed better'n listen to him."

"He might be crazy, but he was sure enough totin' that gold from somewhere," said Glass. "Stands to reason he must o' got it somewhere around here. An' he described the place plain enough."

"You kin still go there if you're a mind to," drawled Luke. "That's if you're smart enough to git out o' this fryin' pan."

"We'll git out all right," said Kinsey. His black eyes narrowed in a challenge. "In fact, I'm gittin' out right soon. I don't aim to sit here an' stew all day just on your say-so. Them Injuns must be halfway to Canada by now."

"You're right!" snapped Glass, and jutted red whiskers at Luke. "If we hadn't listened to this feller, we'd been out o' here an' long gone." He pushed himself to his feet and crossed to the outer rim, reaching up for a handhold to pull himself up the side.

Luke was on his feet, lightly and suddenly as a cat, leaped and brought the stubby little man down with hardly a sound. He silenced the enraged Glass with a low growl and held up one hand to draw the attention of the others. He held up three fingers and pointed downward toward the trail, then he made a sign toward the horses, and the men crept quietly to the still drowsing animals to hold them quiet as Luke had warned them to do.

In a little while the three Indian scouts were outside the rock barrier which now closed the passage. They no longer moved silently. Suddenly a gunshot echoed up the rocky slope, and a moment later the Indian ponies could be heard returning down the trail in response to the signal.

As the thudding hooves came closer the Dutchman stirred, and suddenly, horribly, he began to giggle. Luke left his horse, but the Dutchman was suddenly, vitally alive. He sprang to his feet and the giggle burst into loud laughter as the grotesque little figure went prancing to the rim of the cup, and scrambled up like a joyous monkey. There he balanced with inhuman ease, and began to dance, laughing and shouting with insane glee. The Indian ponies came to a sudden halt at the foot of the rock and for a long, ghastly stretch of time the Dutchman was the only moving thing in the bright, hot day. He tripped lightly around the rim of the cup and began climbing the sheer cliff that rose at the north side. Indian yells sounded abrutly from below, but no arrows were loosed at the little madman. He reached a sharp projection and perched there like a little gargoyle to watch the conflict far below.

THE INDIAN circled the rock and dismounted in the pines. It was not difficult to gain access to the top of the rock, once they knew their quarry was there. It was impossible to fire down on them without exposing head and shoulders, and the Indian climbers were protected by a rear guard of watchful snipers who found protection behind boulders and nearby pines.

Luke crawled out on the rim of the cup and caught one brave in mid leap as he tried to reach safety behind a smooth egg-like boulder, but one of the arrows that filled the air pierced his shoulder and drove him back to tumble into the cup. The shaft quivered with his gasping as he closed brown fingers around it, jerked it free. Blood gushed out and he stuffed a handful of moss into the wound and looked up to see Herman Black staring at him in stark amazement.

"Git up there!" Luke snarled. "Never mind the ones that's climbin', we'll git 'em when they git here. Aim for the ones that's shootin' from behind."

Young Black turned a bewildered face up to the rim of the cup, and then he looked around the hollow with blank incomprehension. Luke struggled to his feet and gave him a push just as Kinsey yelled in surprise and came tumbling down with two arrows sticking in his chest. He landed sitting, still with a look of surprise on his face, and then slowly fell over on his side. Black let loose a shrill yell that startled even Luke, and the next moment he was scrambling up the side of the cup and taking sure aim at something below him. He squeezed the trigger slowly and the old rifle barked like a cannon. A wild shriek answered the explosion as Luke turned away to his horse and awkwardly took off the saddle. Glass scrambled down from the rim, his smoke blackened face savage under the flaming hair, saw what Luke was doing and followed suit. Coleman was stretched flat in a slight break in the rim of the cup, calmly loading and firing in the face of the concentrated fire of several braves. As Luke pushed his saddle ahead of him, he heard him swearing methodically and with deep conviction. The Missourian lifted his rifle to rest on the saddle, loaded, aimed and fired without interrupting his profane litany. Luke slid back painfully and recovered his own rifle just as a greasy, black head lifted at the far side of the cup, slowly and with animal-like caution. Luke slipped behind one of the saddle horses, loaded with deliberation and brought the rifle to rest across the saddle. The Indian, too, poked a rifle over the rim, their eyes met briefly and the guns exploded in the same instant. The Indian vanished, gun and all, and Luke was thrown flat by the horse as the animal jumped and struggled to stay on his feet. Luke managed to roll clear as the horse stumbled and toppled over on his side, moaning like a woman from the pain of a belly wound. The gunshots had risen to a crescendo now as the Indians used their weapons in place of the more accurate arrows to fire a parting volley.

"Hold your fire!" Luke yelled, but only Herman Black heard him and slid down off the rim. "Tell 'em to stop firin'," Luke rasped. "The Injuns are quittin'. Don't use no more ammunition. Tell 'em!"

Black looked at him with cool, steady eyes, and said, "We licked 'em, I reckon." He turned on his heel and brought down Coleman and Glass in turn. Glass had a scalp wound that had stained his hair black.

The noise of the Indians' departure died away and from high overhead, shrill, joyous laughter rippled down to them.

"Now how in the hell," Coleman

said sourly, "are we goin' to git that bugger down offa there?"

IT WAS late afternoon before the rock barrier had been removed from the passage, and still the Dutchman clung to his precarious perch in the hot sun, watching their weary efforts like an untiring spectator.

"I say leave him there," Coleman insisted. "It's easier to carry Kinsey's body back than to bury him in this rock pile, an' it's a cinch we ain't got enough hosses fer the both of 'em."

"After all we went through to find out where that gold come from," growled Glass, "I ain't willin' to give up now. Crazy as he is I bet he could — "

Sharp and sudden gunshots sounded from the trail and the men froze with the shock.

"Them's friendlies," said Luke. "Emptyin' their guns before they hail us." He put his hand on young Black's shoulder. "Come on, boy, help me climb up there. I'm gittin' stiff as sin all along one side."

Luke's parley sounded gutteral and savage to the tensely waiting men, but when he turned and slid down into their midst, his stony face had taken on a wry kind of grin.

"It's old Chief Little Bear an' his band," he said. "Been up to visit Chief Red Cloud about joinin' in the Sioux war, an' he met our recent hostiles on their way home. Says we killed four an' wounded three, but the Sioux are liars. They told him we was twenty-eight men — Here he comes now."

The lean old Cheyenne Chief strode into the cup majestically and embraced Luke, but his expressions of friendship were interrupted by the shrill laughter from overhead.

"It is about the Crazy Dancer I wish to speak," said Little Bear. "He returns to the place where his friends lie dead. Because it is bad medicine to stand in the way of one who talks with the spirits, I have brought back the pouches filled with yellow dust."

Luke held up his palm. "Wait, friend. The other men should hear this story as you tell it. Let my brother, Hawk Plume, interpret what you say."

"It shall be done," said Little Bear gravely, and Hawk Plume took his place beside the Chief with folded arms.

"The man who rode ahead," said Little Bear, "carried the medicine pouches of the Crazy Dancer. Him the Sioux had overtaken and scalped, and from him they took the pouches. When Little Bear saw the pouches, he knew they were those which the Crazy Dancer and his friends had carried from the Black Hills where they found the yellow dust. Little Bear and his party were not far behind the seven men when they camped in the Big Horns on Rim Creek, and two of Little Bear's young men went to visit the camp and to buy tobacco. They watched the white brothers for a long time before approaching, and they saw a strange thing.

"The Crazy Dancer made the bitter black brew (coffee) and all the men drank and were filled with wild spirits. They twisted and rolled on the ground and frothed at the mouth and were dead. All except the Crazy Dancer, who remained on his feet, leaping and dancing about his dead friends. Only he could be filled with the wild spirits and live. He took the two pouches full of yellow dust and called loudly to the spirits, holding the pouches high to show them. Then he went away and left his friends, and my young men came back and told me. I, Little Bear, have explained all this to the Sioux, and they agree with me that it would be bad medicine to stand in the way of the Crazy Dancer. I have brought the pouches back to him."

At a sign the Cheyenne medicine man stepped forward and held up the pouches for the Dutchman to see. He saw and screamed exultantly, and pitched from his perch headfirst to land in their midst like a limp bundle of rags.

CHIEF LITTLE BEAR was on his way down to Fort Laramie to take the presents which had been promised to all Indians in the Territory who would come in and sign the treaty which had been drawn up by the White Fathers. Little Bear had decided not to join Red Cloud's war against the White Fathers. It was better to live in peace than to see the young men die and the women and children cry with hunger. Chief Little Bear would be honored if Luke and his friends would ride with them as far as their camp on the Bozeman Trail.

Kate Roney's spare frame was slumped with weariness, and her weather-beaten face was grimy, but there were no tear streaks as there were on the faces of the other women.

She confronted Luke belligerently. "What do you mean, bringin' them heathen savages back here with you?" she demanded. "As if we ain't had enough trouble with 'em already —what with you lettin' Seeman an' Kinsey git kilt while all our stock was bein' run off. A fine fix you got us in now, Mr. Luke Gamble, an' nary a nugget to show fer it!"

"You kin quit your jawin' right now," Luke said flatly. "You wanta wear your man's boots, an' act like he done, you're goin' to git the same kind o' treatment, which right now, if you was him, would be a punch in the jaw!"

"Now you're talkin'," Kate came back tartly. "You reckon we kin git some hosses off these tarnation savages fer trade, or are we goin' to have to steal 'em like the Injuns done?"

"We'll trade," snapped Luke, "an' we'll give 'em a good bargain, to boot. These Cheyennes is friends right now, an' we got to keep 'em that way. Any sharp dealin', an' the Army's goin' to call you to account fer it."

"I reckon I'm an honest woman, Mr. Luke Gamble," said Kate sternly, and unexpectedly her grimy, weather-beaten face cracked in a grin. "Reckon me an' you could git along right good together, seein' we're both pretty much of the same mind. Happen you should git up Montana way, you be sure an' drop in. My dried apple pies an' beaten biscuits is fust rate, Roney always used to say. Said that's whut he married me fer, an' he didn't never regret it. Now me an' you — "

"Excuse me, ma'am!" blurted Luke, his brown face dyed a rich, wine red. "I got to see Chief Little Bear right away. It's about my — my wife. She's Little Bear's sister, an' — "

"H'mph!" snorted the widow. "Squaw man! I mighta knowed. No wonder you got no use fer civilized women!"

UNSUNG HERO

★ BY SANDY MILLER ★

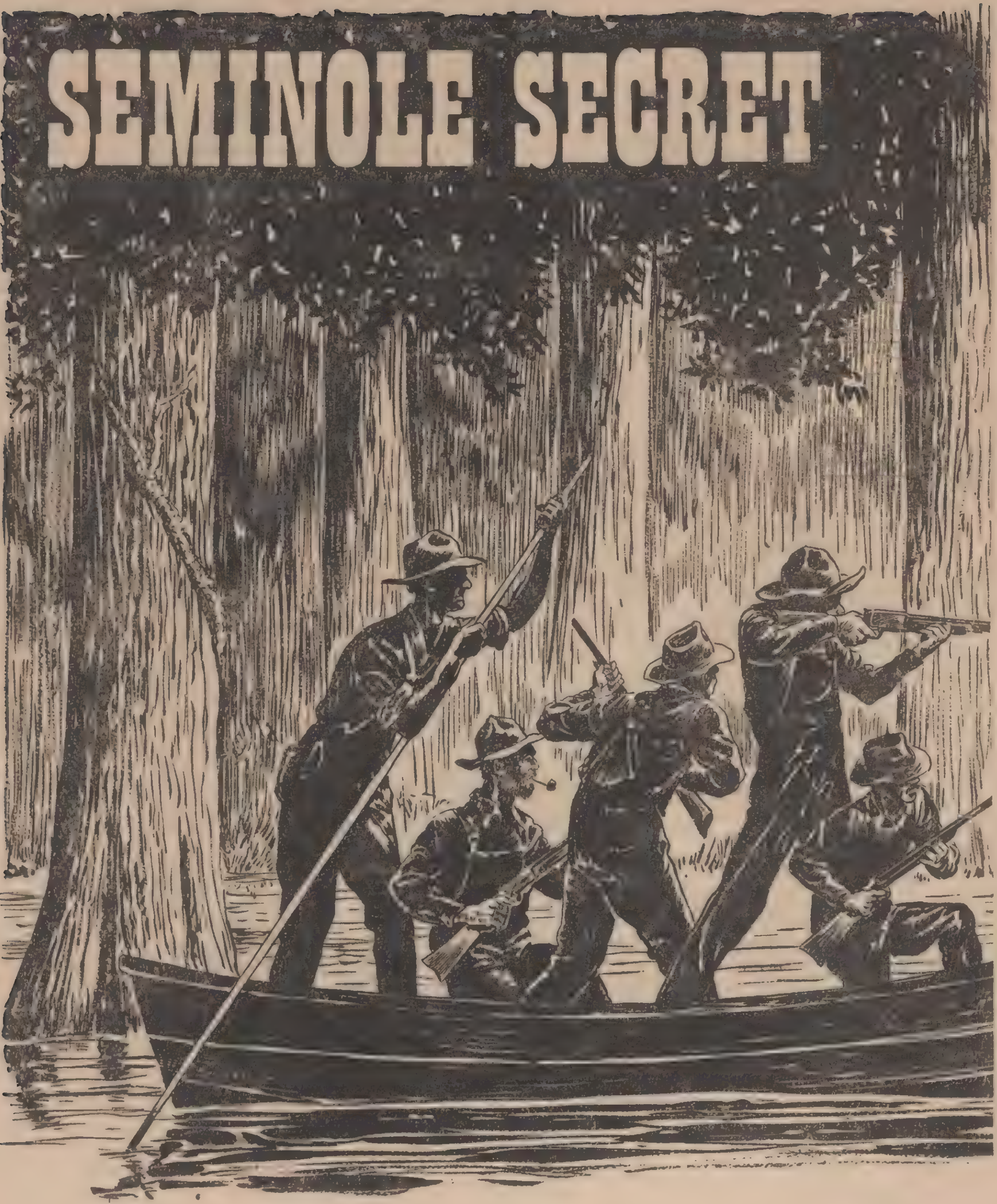
YOU hear and read plenty about the sheriffs, Robin Hood-crooks, rangers, lawmen and other heroes of the west. But those who were probably the greatest get the least praise. Medicine was pretty primitive on the frontier and doctors were few and far between, but they played a role in the developing of the west, that can't be beaten.

Take the case of Doctor Joseph Crane. After the Civil War, when he was discharged from the medical corps of the Union Army, he felt a restlessness that wouldn't be satisfied by resuming practice in his native city of Boston. So he went to the Territory of Nevada, where he settled in a small mining town. When his records are examined it is found that he did nothing spectacular, but the routine work—!

Thousands of people owed their lives to him. Probably the commonest injury that he treated—after the conventional diseases —was gunshot wounds. How many men on both sides of the law owed their lives to him? He, like others of his kind, drew no lines. He treated them all alike regardless of which side of the law they were on, and this neutrality was recognized by the good and bad elements of the place.

The only contact with fame that Dr. Crane had, was the one time when he treated Billy the Kid for a flesh wound, sustained in a running gunfight. His real fame, however rests on the countless babies he delivered, the hundreds of injuries to miners that he treated and the general conscientious work that he did. His epitaph, insisted on by the people who knew him, was —"Doc Crane—he did a good job." Greater glory could be gotten by no man.

SEMINOLE SECRET



By Charles Recour

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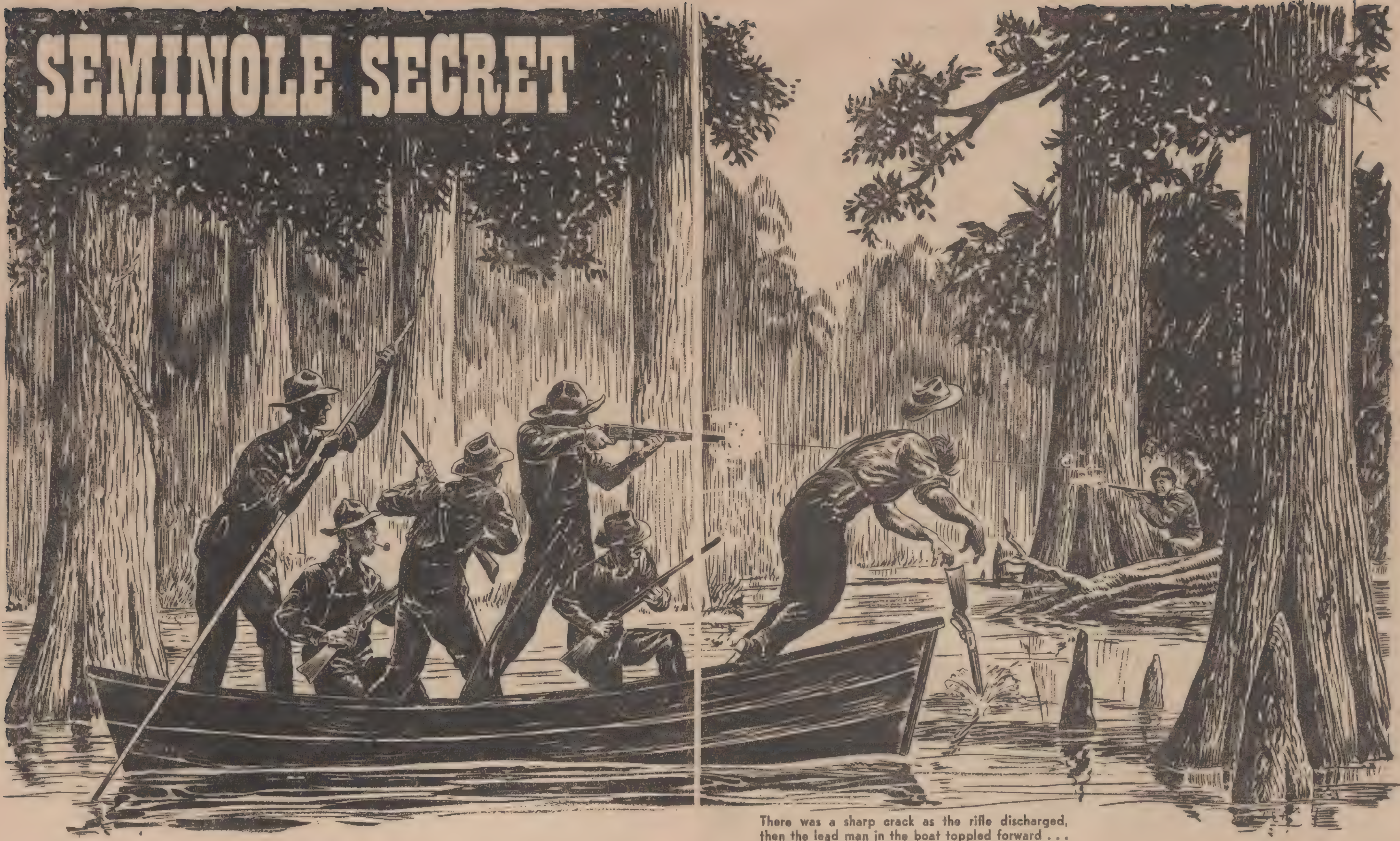

There was a sharp crack as the rifle discharged, then the lead man in the boat toppled forward . . .

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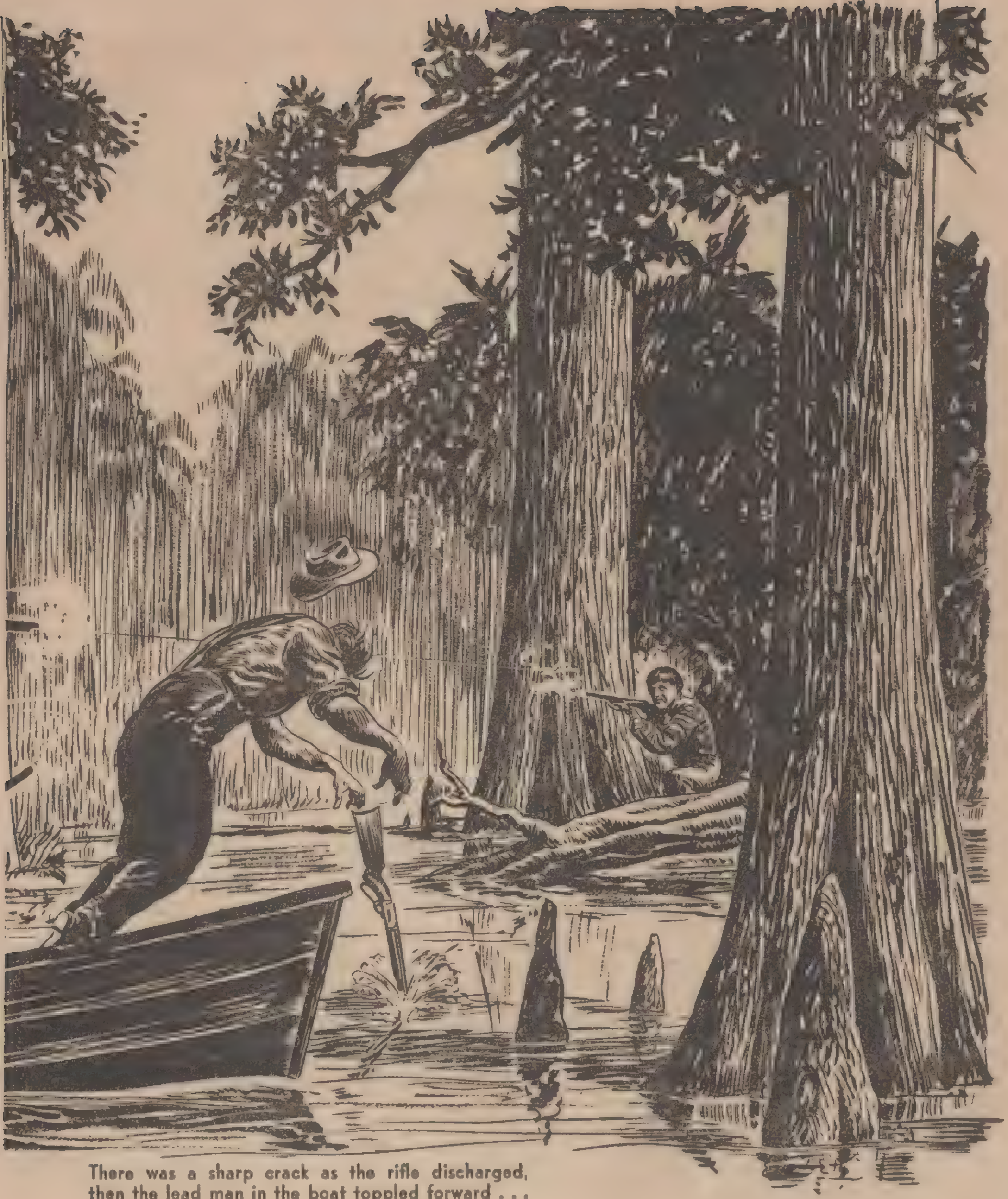
Deep in the Florida swamplands a shot rang out and a man fell dead from a Seminole's bullet. Would there be justice for an Indian?

IT WAS one of those incredibly lovely Florida nights. The blinding heat of the day had vanished under a cool blanket of night air, and the weird and fascinating tropical vegetation lining the sides of the road contributed to the air of unreality.

The Plymouth coupe purred smoothly, the engine humming like the fine machine it was. The radio was softly playing "Embraceable You" and I was completely content. I leaned back in my seat stretching luxuriously. This was the life. What a far cry it was



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The Plymouth coupe purred smoothly, the engine humming like the fine machine it was. The radio was softly playing "Embraceable You" and I was completely content. I leaned back in my seat stretching luxuriously. This was the life. What a far cry it was from Army days, I thought. If the job proves to be half as good as the trip, you're set, Billy, me boy, I told myself.

The road ahead of me, a clear ribbon of black top began to drop and I knew I was approaching Keetcheebee, which was about halfway between Jacksonville and Saratoga. I wanted to make Saratoga by morning. It would be easy to do without pushing the car any faster. I might even have a sandwich and coffee at Keetcheebee.

It was only ten o'clock but most of the lights of the town were out. I couldn't see any places that were open. As I turned a bend in the street, I saw suddenly the flare of lights. There was a combined gas station and lunch stand on one side of the road. Over it was a brilliant neon sign—"Carter's—Gas—Lunch"—and beneath it, a smaller sign, "Bus Stop." I pulled over toward the station. As I did so, I noticed a car blocking the road out of town.

I drove into the gas station and pulled up before the pumps. I shut off the motor and flipped the hood latch. A slow-moving character drifted up to the car. He wore baggy overalls, the common uniform of gas attendants everywhere. He gave me a lazy grin.

"What d'ya want, Mister?" he asked in a lazy drawl.

"Fill it up and check the oil and battery," I said, climbing out of the car. "I'm going to get coffee and."

"O.K." He nodded and reached for the gas hose.

I walked across the gravel way, my feet making crunching sounds against it. I opened the screen door and stepped into the little lunchroom. It was the usual nondescript place, found in so many gas stations.

I sat down at the counter and started to finger the plastic menu card. A sleepy-eyed girl about sixteen came out from the kitchen. She came up to me.

"We got no ham," she said in the familiar drawl.

"I don't like ham anyway," I said. "Give me a cheese—American—on rye—and a cup of coffee. Make it strong."

"It is," she said and turned toward the kitchen. While she was preparing the sandwich, I lit a cigarette and looked around. My eye fell on the dim-lit corner of the room. Sitting in a little booth was a girl. I could see little of her besides her legs but what was there looked really good. She had coffee and a cigarette in front of her. I'd like to know her, I thought, but just then the girl brought my sandwich and coffee. I paid her and started to eat.

The door of the restaurant opened and the gangling youth who had filled my tank, came in. He was followed by another man.

"That'll be three sixty-five," the attendant said. "You needed a quart of oil. I put in number twenty. O. K.?"

"Yes, that's all right," I answered giving him the bills and change. Then I looked at the man with him, as he walked out. The man came up to me.

"You own the car outside, Mister?" the man asked civilly enough.

He was wearing a baggy suit. I sized him up. On his head was a beat-up hat and he had a straggling wisp of a mustache. He spoke with a soft, courteous drawl. But it wasn't those things about him that struck me. He wore an automatic pistol in a leather belt around his waist. On his chest was a glittering badge which read the single word "Sheriff." What does he want with me? I wondered. I hadn't violated any traffic regulations that I remembered. After all I was a conscientious engineer.

"Yes, I own the car," I said levelly, "what's wrong?"

"You plannin' to go to Saratoga tonight?"

"Yes, I am—why not?"

"'Cause it might be dangerous—that's why."

"Stop talking in riddles, man," I said. "Tell me what the story is."

He hooked his thumbs in his belt and sat down on the stool next to me. He had that calm, almost irritating deliberation. He turned to the counter girl.

"Get me a coffee, Cookie," he ordered.

Quickly the girl went to the kitchen and got it. "Here it is, Mr. Jaspers," she said.

SHERIFF JASPERS took a sip of the coffee. He put a cigar between his lips and lighted it. He inhaled deeply, letting the smoke drift from his nostrils. Finally he turned to me.

"You can go through to Saratoga if you want to, Mister," he said, "but I ain't sayin' you'll make it."

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that the girl in the corner was sitting up and listening to our conversation.

"You see," he went on, "the road goes through a hundred miles of swampland. It's dangerous as hell."

The mystery that the man seemed to be enjoying was beginning to exasperate me. He lingered with his story as if to enjoy a fuller flavor by dragging it out.

"I've been driving through a lot of swamp territory," I said, "and it hasn't been dangerous. I stay on the road." I emphasized the word "on."

"I know that," he admitted, "but you didn't have three crazy Indians pot-shotting at you." He started to chuckle.

"Yep," he continued, "anybody'd go through the swamp tonight is loony. He'd never know what hit him. Those Indians are out for blood. They're real murderers tonight."

"Give me the story, Sheriff," I said. "I didn't know any wild Indians were loose. Of course I didn't stop anywhere either."

He started to get up, but before he did, he drained his coffee. "Couple Seminoles, working for Mr. Blodgett, up and killed him tonight. Mr. Blodgett's the owner of Blodgett farms. Shot him an' his servant deader'n a doornail. Then they beat it with their kid in Blodgett's car. We found it thirty miles up the road. Take my advice, son; get yourself a room for the night; we'll ketch 'em by tomorrow or maybe the next day. I'm gonna get Mike Lester. He knows the swamp better'n any man around these parts."

The Sheriff went out the door. It slammed behind him. No wonder they had up that road block. I didn't like the idea of running into three crazy Indians any more than anybody else.

I took another drink of my coffee while I decided what to do. I wanted to get on the job as soon as possible and I was getting tired of spending so much time on the road. On the other hand, I didn't have to be in Saratoga tonight. While I mused to myself, I became aware of the girl who had been sitting in the corner. She was standing at my elbow. I turned to her.

"Pardon me," she said in faultless English, enhanced by the merest trace of a southern accent, "I couldn't help but overhear your conversation with Sheriff Jaspers. My name is Ann Benson. I'd like to ask you a favor. May I?"

I couldn't help but grin; it was a pleasure being approached by her. She was about five four, with jet black hair worn flowingly. Her face was beautiful and it had an air of candor and honesty about it. I liked the way her lips formed when she spoke. She was dressed in a smart-looking suit—a light tan—and she looked like anything but what she was as I soon found out.

"Go right ahead," I said, "Miss Benson. I'd like to help you—and my name is Bill Graystone."

She smiled her completely disengaging smile.

"I'd like a lift. You see, I missed the first bus through here on my way to Saratoga and the second one won't go through if the Sheriff advises the driver not to. I heard you tell the Sheriff that you intended to go through."

"Yes, I do," I said. "Is it so important that you make it tonight?"

"Frankly no," she said, "I don't have to be in Saratoga in that much of a hurry, but still I'd like to get there. I'm going to teach in the local high school and I want very much to get there on time. I don't think there's any danger from those Indians. I think the Sheriff is exaggerating the story."

"I'm inclined to agree with you—but two murders are nothing to laugh at."

"From what I've heard, it's not as simple as that, Mr. Graystone. Anyhow, will you drive me to Saratoga?"

"Of course," I answered. "And call me Bill. It sounds better."

"All right, Bill, I will," she laughed. "And thanks for the lift."

SHE started to walk back to the corner to get the bags. I helped her immediately and we carried a couple of suitcases out to my car. I stowed them in the trunk, and helped her into the car. As I got in on my side, I asked:

"Are you comfortable, Miss Benson?"

"Yes," she answered, "—and it's Ann."

"Fine," I said, "I'm glad to have sociable company."

"Sociability is fun," she said airily with a toss of her lovely head, "within reason."

I guess that was a less than veiled remark meaning that there were limits. I grinned.

"Don't worry," I said, "I'm always the perfect gentleman."

"I'm sure you are,' she answered, laughing, "or I wouldn't have asked you."

That stopped me. "You win," I said, mockingly raising my hands, "I surrender."

I put the car in gear and started to roll down the driveway toward the road and as I neared it, the Sheriff was standing to one side waving me down.

I stopped. He stepped up to the open window on Ann's side and spoke across her to me.

"I'm warning you, young feller, it ain't safe. You're takin' a chance. If them crazy Indians decide to grab another car—watch out."

"I don't think it's that bad, Sheriff," I said. "I appreciate your advice, but I'd like to make Saratoga by morning and I really can't wait. So long, Sheriff." With that I let in the clutch and we were on our way.

I turned on the radio and let it play softly. Ann sat on her side of the car and didn't say much at first. The car purred along smoothly over the two-lane highway which wound and twisted through the heavy growths on either side of it. It was almost like being in an inpenetrable jungle and the headlights cast weird shadows on the way ahead.

It was necessary to go at a rather moderate pace because the road wasn't in the best of condition. I felt a little nervous at this but it had to be done if I didn't want a breakdown.

"Well, Ann," I said in an effort to open conversation, "how does it feel to be riding with a stranger along a road infested with murderous Indians? Are you afraid?"

She turned to me with a little start as if I'd awakened her from her musing. Her delightful smile broke out. I was beginning to like this girl.

"I'm not afraid of the Indians, if that's what you mean," she said.

"Certainly you're not afraid of me?" I said jokingly.

"Why aren't you afraid of the Indians?" I had noticed that she had made that statement several times.

"You didn't hear the whole story, Bill. But I did. I talked with a couple of the townspeople while I was waiting. They're not murderous Indians any more than we are."

"Go ahead, Ann," I said, interested, "tell me more. I thought from what the Sheriff said that Blodgett—whoever he is—and his servant were brutally shot by a mad Indian and his wife. Isn't that true?"

"Far from it," Ann said. "That's the Sheriff's story. He was appointed by Blodgett. Naturally he'd be sympathetic. You see, Blodgett was a big man around this part of the state. At least I'm told he was. Mrs. Shaefer—she's the one who told me the story—said that he rented a lot of small farming properties to all sorts of people. Well, Osceola—that's the Indian—and his wife Meneola, and their baby lived on Blodgett's land. Mrs. Shaefer said they were pure-blooded Seminoles who were sick of reservation life and they farmed this stretch of land for Blodgett. She said that Blodgett and his servant went down to collect some bill or other at the Indian's shack. Osceola wasn't home. Blodgett suddenly started to make advances to Meneola while the servant kept the baby outside. Mrs. Shaefer got the story from Osceola and she seemed to believe it firmly. Anyhow, Osceola stumbled in on the scene. He didn't say anything apparently. He just brained Blodgett with an axe and then shot the servant who was running away. Evidently after he realized what he had done, he took Blodgett's car and headed for the swampland—here. They found the abandoned car.

"Before Osceola and his wife left though, they got some food from Mrs. Shaefer who knows them well. She keeps a little store. Anyhow she believes firmly in Osceola and she said he ought to get a medal for getting rid of Blodgett. So Osceola and his wife and boy are somewhere in these swamps—I feel sorry for them."

ANN shuddered and made a grimace of distaste as she looked out the windows. Every now and then we would see little patches of scum-covered water, barely visible under the headlights and through the trees. It was enough to give anybody the creeps.

I fished cigarettes from my pocket and offered one to Ann. She took it gratefully and after I had lit hers, she inhaled gratefully.

"I'm truly sorry for them, Bill. I know what terrible treatment Indians have gotten."

Her story changed my whole impression of the affair. I could see now why the Sheriff hadn't really exerted himself in stopping me. He didn't want any more strangers around than necessary. Poor Osceola, I thought, you're trapped!

I changed the subject and got Ann to talk about herself. She said she was going to teach school in Saratoga and that she'd been vacationing in Jacksonville with an aunt. She hadn't been out of school more than a year and she was looking forward to her assignment with interest. She told me the little things about herself and the more she talked the better I liked her. I discovered that we had a lot of mutual interests.

My story was simple to tell. I told her how I'd finished school and had gotten a good engineering job in Saratoga. I also made it clear that I'd like to see a lot more of her. In this pleasant fashion with the soft music in the background we hummed along almost forgetting where we were. I glanced down at the mileage indicator and was surprised to see that we'd gone more than thirty miles into the swamp. For some uncanny reason, in spite of my having this lovely Ann with me, I felt queasy.

"This must be where Osceola stopped Blodgett's car," I said, glancing down at the mileage indicator. We looked around for some sign of where it had been stopped but the Sheriff's men had already taken it back. We were doing about forty miles an hour because it wasn't too bad on this part of the road.

I almost knew it was coming before it did. I sensed it. There was a loud sound of a tire popping and the car swerved violently toward the right of the road. There was no shoulder to go off on. I fought the wheel and brought the car quickly to a stop. Ann had been flung more or less roughly against me and the feeling wasn't at all unpleasant. In fact I was less conscious of the flat tire and our position than I was of the scent of Ann's raven hair in my nostrils.

Ann moved to her side again, a faint flush on her cheeks.

I said calmly: "I'll get out and repair it. You wait here, Ann. Don't get out of the car."

"I hope it isn't bad, Bill," Ann said.

"It can't be. I'll just slip the spare on and we'll take off in five minutes."

I got out the tire changing tools and the jack. I had left the headlights on because there was no way to pull off the road and it was barely possible that we might have been run down by a car coming along the relatively tortuous, twisting road. Even as I worked I could almost sense the slither of reptilian creatures in the swamp surrounding us.

I glanced up at Ann for a moment. She was sitting erect in the seat and there was a frightened look on her face. She had cupped her hand to her mouth as if to prevent a scream.

"Bill," she said softly through the car window, "Bill—look!"

Slowly I straightened up and turned around. Facing me was a Seminole Indian. He was a magnificent figure of a man, about six feet two, bronze-muscled like a statue. He held a heavy revolver in his hand but he did not point it at me. He stood there impassively, a granite figure, immobile, calm and certain. I held the wheel wrench in my hand, but I knew that I stood no chance whatsoever of doing anything against this man. I controlled my voice.

"You are Osceola?" I said making the statement a question. I don't know why I said it because I knew perfectly well that this man could be only he.

"You know 'bout me," he said, gutturally but not unpleasantly. "I kill Blodgett and Caston."

I glanced at Ann. She no longer looked frightened. She stepped out of the car to my side.

"Osceola," she said. "We know about you. I talked with Mrs. Shaefer."

"She is good woman," Osceola said. "She help me get 'way from town."

WHILE the conversation was going on I mentally debated whether or not to try to jump the Seminole. Maybe I could get in a damaging blow with the wrench before he could do anything with the gun. Then I laughed to myself. It was ridiculous to even consider. I'd have been shot before I got my arm up—and Ann would be left to his mercies. In spite of her acknowledged confidence in him, I was still hesitant. His next words completely changed the picture and dismissed my fears.

"I want you to help me," he said to me. "Come with me in swamp. Baby sick—we no know what to do. Help me, please. I will not hurt you."

There was such a note of pleading and fear in his voice that all my worries over the fact that he had murdered two men, vanished. Mrs. Shaefer's version of the story had been true. That was apparent. Here was a simple man, who had reacted as any man would have had his wife been attacked. He had killed the attackers but because the men he had killed were affluent, his own life was now in jeopardy. The hell with getting to Saratoga, I thought; this man is a human being and he needs help. Ordinarily I'm not a particularly good Samaritan, but this time . . .

Besides, even though I didn't admit it to myself, I knew unconsciously that Ann would want me to. And I wanted to be good in her eyes. Something was happening to me when I thought of Ann.

I turned to Ann and took both her hands in mine.

"I'm going to help him, Ann. Take my car and drive to Saratoga. I'll see you there eventually. You're right about Osceola. I think he's getting a dirty deal, and anything I can do to help him, I will. I don't know much about babies or medicines, but I'll do whatever I can."

"Not so fast, Bill," she said, and squeezed my hands. "I'm going with you. I know something about nursing—and babies."

"Now, wait a minute, Ann," I protested. "You can't go into that filthy, dangerous swamp. Take the car and get out of this mess."

"I'm not going to do that, Bill. Besides I've lived in the South longer than you. Don't worry about the 'filthy, dangerous swamp.' " She answered with a smile.

Osceola listened to us impassively, and he said nothing. I turned to him for support.

"Tell her, Osceola," I said, "how bad it is in the swamp."

He shugged his shoulders. "It not bad—just be careful. People live in swamp. My people live there long time. Please, you both come. Help me with baby."

"See," Ann said, "he's on my side. Don't you want me with you, Bill?" I thought I detected a note of humorous mockery in her voice.

"Oh, Ann, you know it isn't that. Of course I want you with me—I—I—"

I stumbled and stuttered lamely. Finally I laughed and Ann joined me.

"Women always win," I said. "All right, Osceola, lead the way."

I took the flashlight from the car. The three of us crossed the road, and Osceola plunged right into the tree-infested forest. Ann followed him and I brought up the rear. The ground beneath our feet was firm at first and I noticed that Ann's shoes were only moderately high heeled. Sensible girl, I thought. Still they brought out the shapeliness of her legs.

We walked steadily for ten minutes, the branches of the thick foliage continually brushing against our faces. There was the primeval, damp, moist smell of water-soaked ground and vegetation. The condensed moisture clinging to the leaves of the undergrowth through which we plowed rubbed off on our clothes and Ann's suit and mine were soon completely dampened.

The ground began to get spongier and spongier as we went on until very soon we were sinking in up to our ankles. Ann moved back to my side and took my hand.

"Do you mind, Bill?" she asked tremulously, "I'm afraid."

"No, Ann," I comforted her, "it makes me feel better too. I wonder if we are not sticking out our necks."

"Oh no, Bill," she said, "we're doing the right thing. I *know* that Osceola is good."

A FEW minutes more and Osceola halted in front of us. It was about time too. The ground was extremely soft and treacherous. And Ann and I were slithering around like a couple of elephants in quicksand.

We had come to the edge of a stream. It was hard to tell where ground ended and water began. On the bank of the stream were three more Seminoles including a woman of surprising beauty—evidently Osceola's wife. She was holding a baby in her arms. She pressed it to her breast and she was softly crooning some obscure melody. The other Indians were standing by impassively. Both carried rifles, I noticed.

Osceola said something rapidly to his wife. Ann came forward hesitantly and Meneola stepped up shyly. Osceola spoke sharply. Meneola handed the baby to Ann who took it carefully in her arms and in the manner of women everywhere whispered and cuddled it delicately. I stepped up alongside Ann.

"What is it, Ann?" I asked. "Have you any idea what's wrong?"

"The little thing has a fever, Bill. But I don't know what's causing it."

"I don't think the swamp is any place to keep a baby. It's too unhealthy." I shuddered.

With the painful look of any perturbed father, Osceola asked us what was the matter. Ann explained to him that she didn't know, but that it was her guess that the swamp was no place for a baby.

Even as we talked, a plan was going through my mind. From the way Osceola and the other Indians acted, I knew that they didn't feel safe talking so much so near the road.

"Listen, Osceola," I said. "Your wife didn't have any part in the—the killings, did she?"

"No," he said, "Meneola did nothing. I kill the two men." There was bitterness and despair in his voice.

"All right, then. Meneola will have to get out of the swamp and take the baby to a doctor." I turned to Ann. "Will you take Meneola and the baby in my car?"

"Of course," she said, "but what about you? Where are you going?"

"I'm going to stay with Osceola a while and see if I can't help him."

Ann smiled. "You've suddenly become an altruist, Bill. You didn't sound like that before."

"I know it sounds crazy, Ann, but this Seminole is no more guilty of murder than I am. All he did was try to defend his wife and child. I should think that any jury would understand that."

"'Any jury' would," Ann answered, "but the trouble is that the sheriff and a few others would rig it terribly—all with friends of the Blodgett character. He was a big man in the town you know."

"I understand that—that and the fact that there were no witnesses. We have only Osceola's word, and while we believe it—will anyone else?"

Osceola interrupted us: "Please, Mister, hurry. We go from here."

Meneola and Ann and the baby started back toward the car. Meneola knew the way, Osceola assured me. And they had my flashlight.

"I'm coming with you, Osceola," I said. "I want to try to help you."

He shrugged his shoulders. "You come with me but you no can help. I got to hide forever."

"Maybe not," I said. We talked for a few minutes, when suddenly one of Osceola's friends raised his hand and signalled silence.

We listened closely. There were some unusual sounds coming over the common ones of swamp night life. In addition to the rumble of frogs, the buzz of insects, and the rasping of leaf against leaf, I could hear the distinct plop-plop of feet in mud."

"Sheriff!" Osceola whispered. "Come!" He beckoned to me.

I went down further toward the muddy stream. There were two canoes waiting there. The canoes were superb examples of the boatmaker's art even to my untrained eyes. They were hollowed from single logs, but so neatly were they made and so thin were their shells that they looked as if they'd been made of plywood. Both boats were shallow-draft shells, ideal for navigating shallow swamp waters. They were painted white.

OSCEOLA and I got in one. The two Seminoles took the other. In an instant under the long sweeping poles of the Seminoles in the rear of each canoe, we were out on the stream. Osceola moved effortlessly, and the canoe shot ahead like a bullet.

At the same time there was a raucous cry, "Halt!" and a rifle bullet spanged overhead. I turned my head and could see the flash of gunfire. Bullets came uncomfortably close, but soon we had outdistanced our pursuers.

For a quarter of an hour we sped along the waterway, which at times changed completely from a little stream five feet wide to a broad pool a hundred feet wide. The dropping llianas and vines from the trees ashore leaned over us. This gave the effect of a huge gloomy cavern. I could hear above the rustle of water through which our canoes rippled, a sinister slither of reptilian life. Who knew how many water moccasins and alligators infested these waters?

Finally we pulled over to the bank and the canoes were quickly drawn up on the shore even as we leaped out. There seemed to be a little community here. From what I could see, there were no more than thirty people, some women, some men. There were a few bark huts, some boats and canoes drawn up near them.

They eyed me suspiciously. I did make a strangely contrasting sight. The Seminoles were clad in rather colorful costumes, dirtied from their work but still recognizable. My suit was a muddy mess and I was water-soaked through and through. The steaming humidity didn't help either.

Osceola spoke to the group rapidly evidently explaining who I was. That seemed to relax the tension and thereafter they paid no attention to me. Osceola took me to a bark hut. My cigarettes had remained dry—a little limp—but smokeable. I lit one, as did Osceola and I inhaled deeply and gratefully while I took cognizance of my surroundings.

It was an unusual position for an electrical engineer to find himself. One minute I was bound for a power plant, the next I found myself in the heart of a Florida jungle swamp with a Seminole Indian wanted for the murder of two presumably respectable citizens.

I knew what a rotten deal the Seminole Indians had gotten ever since the Spaniards had come to Florida. They'd been persecuted by the Spaniards, by the French, by our government and by white settlers. As a unit tribe they'd almost been eliminated.

Quite a few lived as trappers now, in the swamps as did these people, making their living by skinning alligators and snakes and selling their products for the simple requirements of their lives. Because by living in the swamps they could stay unmolested by anyone, many of them preferred to remain there. And to think that Osceola, driven to refuge, was named after the greatest chief of the Seminole tribes!

Osceola waited for me to speak, meditatively calm, with superb indifference to his fate.

I tried to talk him into returning and giving himself up to stand trial. Certainly no fair jury on earth would convict him for defending his wife's honor. Meneola was a strikingly beautiful Indian girl, and it shouldn't take much to convince any jury that the victims of her husband's anger had been the villains in the piece.

Osceola explained that he could hide out indefinitely in the swamps. He could hunt too and his friends would sell his catch. In that way he'd be able to make money for Meneola. And that was what he was going to do. He made it very clear. I didn't think it was that simple.

"Listen, Osceola," I said suddenly. "You take me out of the swamp. I'll go to Mrs. Shaefer and find out what is happening in the town. Then I'll come back here. I'll find out about the baby too."

His eyes lighted up and he agreed. Without further discussion we got into one of the canoes and Osceola began to pole down a different stream. For an hour we went along at a steady rate until gradually the waterway began to narrow off. Soon the canoe bumped solid earth.

"Two mile up is road," Osceola said, "then north is town—twenty-five mile."

I took his hand. "I'll be back here tonight, Oceola, and I'll give you the news. Meet me here." It was easy to mark the spot by the peculiar formation of trees, even though I was no woodsman.

I WENT up until I found the road. Dawn was beginning to break, though I was not conscious of being tired. Cars were beginning to come through and in spite of the fact that I looked like a disreputable bum, it wasn't difficult for me to get a lift. In an hour I was back in the town. Osceola had told me the address of Mrs. Shaefer. Quickly I found the place, an inconspicuous simple little residence on one of the numerous shady side streets.

Just as the sun rose I went up to her door. I knocked. For a few minutes there was no answer. I looked at the side window of the living room where the shades were drawn and I thought I detected a movement as if someone had been peering out.

The front door opened and a matronly looking woman of about sixty stood confronting me. There was a big smile on her face.

"Come in," she boomed heartily. "Come in, Mr. Graystone. We expected you."

Half-dazed with astonishment, I stepped into the living room. The wife of Osceola was sitting on the sofa, smiling! In her arms she held her baby whom I had left only a few hours before. The baby was sleeping peacefully and the flush of fever was gone from its face.

"Oh, Bill," a lovely voice trilled, "you look as if you'd been through a wringer." Ann dashed into the living room and came over to me. The re-action of the night's events set in and I fell forward or started to. I stumbled against Ann, and whether by instinct or intent or what have you, she was in my arms, and I was whispering against her ear, "Oh, Ann, oh, Ann."

For a moment she clung to me fiercely. Then we drew apart, half embarrassed by our intensity, especially in the eyes of strangers.

Meneola was smiling broadly, and a merry laugh pealed from the stout woman, Mrs. Shaefer.

"Mrs. Shaefer, this is Bill Graytone, whom I told you about," Ann said, her face flushed, but happy, I thought.

"I knew it, the minute I saw him, Ann. He's a nice young man. Come in the kitchen and have some breakfast," Mrs. Shaefer said hospitably.

I followed Ann and her into the kitchen and after washing up a little sat down to a huge breakfast of bacon and eggs, toast, orange juice and finally a steaming cup of hot coffee. Not until I had finished eating did they question me. Ann had some cigarettes and as soon as we had lighted them, Ann explained what had happened.

"Meneola and I and the baby just reached the road when we saw the sheriff and his men. They seized us, but they knew where we came from so they didn't spend much time questioning us. Besides they saw that the baby was sick. All they want Meneola for is a witness. Why, I don't know. She certainly can tell only the truth. Meneola suggested going back to town to Mrs. Shaefer's."

"I'm glad you did, lass," Mrs. Shaefer said. "I've known Osceola and Meneola for a long time. I think of them as my own children. They've worked for me too. I have to help them and I will." Then a look of rage spread over her face. "That dirty Blodgett! I always suspected he liked Meneola. He was nothing but an evil man and I'm glad he's dead—but I wish it hadn't been Osceola that did the job. It wouldn't be safe for Osceola to stand trial in this town. Not with the jury that Sheriff Jaspers with the judge would rig up. You see," she explained to me, "Jaspers was Blodgett's man."

"I knew that, Mrs. Shaefer!" Then I explained to her what Osceola's intentions were. "And I'm going to meet him tonight where he let me off now a couple of miles east of the road."

"Well," Mrs. Shaefer said, "you get some sleep—and eat again later. I'm sure Ann will take care of you." She winked at me and Ann blushed. "I'm going to go wandering around town," she continued, "and I'll find out what the sheriff's intentions are. Ann, honey, keep an eye on the baby although I don't think you'll have any more trouble. But one thing is sure. Meneola and the baby can't go back into the swamp. I won't let 'em."

"Don't worry about that, Mrs. Shaefer," Ann said, taking a sip of coffee. "I know Meneola won't go back if there's a chance of hurting the baby even though she wants to see Osceola. He wouldn't allow it either."

MRS. SHAEFER left us then and Ann and I talked for quite a while. She had wired the school she would be delayed, and I asked her to do the same for me later. We talked about everything under the sun, but mostly about what we could do for Osceola and Meneola. About ourselves we said little. I noticed though that when I looked at Ann the expression on her face said that she could read what was in my heart. And it made me happy.

I lay down shortly after that; I was soon sound asleep. I didn't remember a thing until I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Wake up, Bill," Ann said, "Mrs. Shaefer is back. Besides it's six o'clock. Wake up, sleepy head!"

I sat up sleepily, dragged myself from the bed, showered and shaved with the things Ann brought in from my car in Mrs. Shaefer's garage and soon I was out in the kitchen again with Ann, Meneola and Mrs. Shaefer. The baby was resting quietly.

"Well," Mrs. Shaefer said, as we sat down to have another meal, "it looks bad for Osceola. Sheriff Jaspers has half a dozen men. They've got boats and the promise of some other men, and they're going to drag the swamp for Osceola, if it takes a month. At least, that's what Jaspers says."

"Oh, that isn't so bad," I said. "From the little I've seen of the swamps it'll take a lot more men than that and they'll have to be a lot smarter. It looks to me as if Osceola could hide out indefinitely."

"But's that's no answer to Osceola and Meneola's problems, Bill," Ann protested. "They don't want to be refugees forever."

"I don't see how they can afford it either," I answered, "but that's exactly what they're going to have to do unless Osceola surrenders himself—"

"And gives up to that pack of fixed wolves," Mrs. Shaefer interrupted bitterly. She turned to Meneola. "No matter what happens," she said sympathetically, "you and the baby can always stay here."

There were tears of gratitude in Meneola's eyes. "I work for you Mis' Shaefer. I work always much and help you. You give Osceola and me so much. And you help us too. I give thank you. Maybe I work for you someday too," she added turning to Ann and me.

I looked at Ann and Ann looked at me. Her eyes dropped first. I said nonchalantly: "I'd like that Meneola—maybe you will help us."

"Well," I said, getting up from the table, "I'll have to get started. It's getting dark and I promised to meet Osceola soon." I turned to Ann. "Is there gas in the car?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "it's full."

I started to go out the back door down to the garage when Ann said, "Wait, Bill, I'll go with you."

The two of us walked through the rapidly falling dusk toward the garage. We stopped in front of the garage door.

"Bill," Ann said softly.

"Yes," I said equally softly.

"Be careful, Bill." Ann looked up at me with soul-searching eyes. That was enough. Suddenly I gathered her in my arms. For a brief second she resisted, then her arms crept around my neck and she clung to me fiercely.

"I don't care, Bill," she said. "I—I—."

"I love you, darling. I love you more than anything on earth," I interrupted.

"I love you too, sweetheart," she said. "It just happened. Please be careful. Please, dear."

Reluctantly I disengaged her arms from around my neck. "When this is done, darling, there'll be so much I want to tell you."

"I know, Bill. Me too."

Floating on pure air I got into the car and the last sight I saw was the exquisite face of Ann framed by her beautiful black hair receding from me.

In a half hour I was at the appointed spot in the road. I pulled the car as nearly off the road as I dared without allowing it to sink into the extremely soft shoulder of the road.

THEN I started across the forested firm ground on the left side of the road that led to my rendezvous with Osceola. I had discarded my coat at

Mrs. Shaefer's and was wearing only a shirt and muddied trousers. Shortly I came upon the clump of trees that marked the spot where I had last seen Osceola only a short while before.

I heard a low whistle. Then another and the Indian bounded toward me out of the dark. As he came up to me I said fiercely:

"Let's get out of here quickly, Osceola. I tried not to be followed but I don't know for sure. Let's take no chances. Quick, where is the canoe?"

"You follow. I lead the way." In an instant Osceola was retracing his steps with me following. It wasn't a very long walk but I was apprehensive all the way. The sheriff must have known about me—if only the fact that my car had been in town had been reported to him—which it undoubtedly was. Though I had seen no sight of trailers, I couldn't be sure. Therefore, I wanted to get into the swamp as quickly as possible. Soon we came on the little stream and the canoe tied to a tree. I hopped in with Osceola riding the stern.

Only then did I breathe a sigh of relief. Again the blackness of the swamp closed over us. It was suffocatingly still, the air was intensely humid, and I was drenched with sweat. Around me I heard the thousand night sounds that made up the swamp, and every now and then the canoe was bumped by some swimming creature—snake or alligator.

I looked back at Osceola. He was a splendid figure of a man. Magnificently muscled, the rippling of those steel bands could be seen beneath the thin fabric of his costume. Calm and placid, his face gave no hint of the seething, turbulent emotions that must be raging in his brain. He used the pole with consummate skill, neither wasting nor conserving energy but propelling the light canoe at a steady rapid pace. I felt pride in just knowing this eminent savage who, through a trick of fate, was now being hunted by men who weren't fit to work for him, much less hunt him down and apply their corrupted standard of justice.

After the same trip which I barely recognized we came once more to the settlement—if it could be dignified by that word—and Osceola and I went into the little hut where we had been before.

Several other Seminoles joined us. Rapidly I outlined the events of the day, stressing the fact that Meneola and the baby were permanently safe. Then I told Osceola what Mrs. Shaefer had learned about the posse that the sheriff was rounding up for a thorough hunting job. He shook his head at this.

"Will they stand a chance of catching you, Osceloa?" I asked.

"Me stay here—they catch me. Me go away—they never catch me." His face acquired a puzzled look. "Me go away—no see Meneola and baby. And me stay here, they hurt my friends." He swung his arm around in a gesture that swept all of us. I was proud to be included.

For a long time he sat with his head bowed in thought. Evidence of the terrific struggle that he was going through was apparent by the way his hands clenched and unclenched. By the acts of violence wherein he had taken the law into his own hands, he had gone against the law forever. This he knew. He knew that he was a criminal in spite of the fact that his act was justifiable. What should he do?

Presently he rose. "Me leave this place. No want friends to get hurt. Maybe sometime me see Meneola. But not now." Regardless of the despair that infused him he had made his stand, had taken his position. He would run away. Personally I doubted whether it was possible for the sheriff to catch this man, even with a very good posse. Osceola knew the swamps too well. At best they were never a white man's forte.

Suddenly, as we left the hut, I heard a raucous bawling cry. There was a flare of light and the sound of a rifle. Without a word, Osceola snatched up his lever-action Winchester. He grabbed me by the arm, and dragged me with him down to the canoe. He flung me in it. I moved with alacrity.

He snatched the pole and in a moment we were headed out into the swamp. Now a regular fusillade of shots rang out. On his knees crouching low, Osceola propelled the light canoe with all the force his arms could muster. We shot out onto clearer water like a bullet. I crouched low in the boat. Evidently the sheriff hadn't spotted us. There were no lights showing but we could hear the shouts of men and the random shots fired over the water in the ridiculous chance, I suppose, that one would catch Osceola.

SOON we were out of hearing. Occasionally rifle fire came to our ears, but not voices. We had outdistanced the pursuers whoever they were. It was apparent that they would question the trappers and swampsmen, but we knew they would never give us away. Osceola assured me of that. I could picture the frustrated sheriff writhing in his helplessness.

"They take canoes and spread out on all the streams," Osceola said, tapping me on the shoulder to get my attention. "Then they finally catch the two. Me put you off where you get back. I go away. Far away. They never find me."

"Let me off anywhere, Osceola," I said. "I'll be able to make my way back." He refused, insisting that he take me to a familiar point so that there would be no danger of getting lost in the swamp. I knew that he was right.

Left alone, it was perfectly possible for me to get lost in two minutes. It took a lifetime of training to live in the swamp, to have even a bare indication of one's location was a job for an expert. The swamp was a vast jungle filled with deadly creatures and traps, waiting anxiously to entrap any man in its toils. Yes, Osceola was right. I'd have to be put off back where we met.

It dawned on me that technically I was a criminal too. I was aiding and abetting the escape of a refugee from the law. I was doing so with the full knowledge of the facts. But that was a poor way to salve my conscience for my good fortune in not being in Osceola's shoes. I knew that nothing would come of my association with Osceola. They'd never dare prosecute me for my part in Osceola's escape.

We drifted on and on. Finally Osceola pulled into a thicket of rushes. It was pitch black and I could see practically nothing. But Osceola's eyes were like a cat's. Often he commented on what he was seeing. I marveled at the man's woodcraft—plus skilled eyesight.

Then gradually it came to my ears. There was the soft slop-slop of dripping water as from paddles or poles. The sheriff and his men were approaching. By sheer chance they must have taken this little tributary and so followed us. I must have underestimated the skill of Jaspers and his men.

It seemed that from everywhere I could hear rustles. Quietly I waited. Osceola looked long at me. "You friend of me," he said with quiet dignity in a bare whisper. He took my hand and wrung it firmly. "Me grateful for what you do. I go now."

As silently as a snake, Osceola

slipped over the side of the canoe in the slimy black water infested with snakes and alligators, with the nonchalance of a man stepping into a diner. There was no prolonged farewell, no tearful good-bye. With Seminole Indian dignity, Osceola left, knowing that sooner or later I'd be picked up by the sheriff's men. The point was that he made sure that I'd be safe before he left. The more I thought about it the surer I was that his getaway would have been simplified a great deal if I hadn't been along. Well, it was too late to cry over spilt milk.

I watched as he slithered through the water as silently as an eel. He left no wake. Nothing marked his path.

I saw a figure materialize on the farther bank. Then another. And another. Crouching down in the canoe hidden in the rushes was advantageous. I could see surprisingly well now that my eyes were growing used to the dark.

I glanced down at my watch. It read four o'clock. That was bad. The sheriff had a large number of men at his disposal and I could feel their numbers increasing just by that peculiar sixth sense that you acquire when you're in danger. Dawn would be coming soon and then Osceola's chances of getting away would be greatly diminished. I lay there scarcely daring to breathe. I began to realize the danger of my own position. When the posse spotted the canoe with someone in it, they'd shoot first and ask questions afterward. After all they thought they were after a dangerous murderer.

I wondered where Osceola was. A shallow boat glided past my position not fifty feet away. I could hear the rumble of subdued voices. The rising tones of questions and their resonant answers came back to me but I couldn't make out what they were saying.

Then another canoe went by. Two more of the sheriff's men. There were men on the shore. Osceola, I thought, I'm afraid that unless you've gotten out of this ring by now, your goose is cooked.

GRADUALLY dawn came and in the dim light that accompanied it, I could see numerous groups of men making for the position ahead of my boat.

Suddenly a voice shouted: "There's the canoe! Over there!"

This was my cue. I jumped erect with my hands up. "Don't shoot! Don't shoot! My name is Graystone."

A half dozen guns were pointed at me, and the lead boat containing the sheriff approached the canoe. His face was twisted in a nasty grin:

"I shoulda shot you, young feller, fer helping that murderer get away. I ain't through with you yet; you're in trouble, boy, and I'll see you get it." He gestured with his gun. "Come on in this boat."

I stepped aboard the flat bottomed boat. I grinned contemptuously at Jaspers.

"Thanks," I said mockingly, "for rescuing me from Osceola. It was a close call for me."

"Rescuin' you—why—why!" The sheriff spluttered indignantly for a moment and then regained his aplomb. "Yes," I continued, "Osceola held me a prisoner. There was nothing I could do about it. Think that'd hold in court, Jaspers?"

Red and glaring the sheriff realized that the technicality was mine and he couldn't do a thing to me—legally.

Suddenly there was the sharp crack of a rifle. An exultant yell followed. "There he is! There he is." One of the men in the other boats was gesturing toward a clump of trees near the bank. A half dozen rifles opened fire on the spot. There was no answer. My heart sank. Had Osceola been hit?

Then my eye was caught by a peculiar flicker. Maybe it was my imagination, but I thought I saw the empty canoe I had just been taken off of, rock a little. There it went again! By God, Osceola *was* under his canoe. He hadn't gone far when he left me. Then evidently he's swum his way underwater right back to where he's left me. Clever! I prayed and hoped that no one spotted the slight rocking of the canoe. He must be just keeping his head above water enough to breathe and no more.

The sheriff in the prow of the boat scanned the water and jungle growths on either side carefully and thoroughly. There was no success.

Suddenly someone spotted the rocking canoe. A yell went out. Again gunfire converged on the spot. A furious fusillade rocked the canoe and it was riddled with holes. It seemed impossible that anything in it or around for ten feet could live.

But there was no sight of Osceola. Cautiously the boat approached the canoe. Every eye was on the spot. I looked there for a while.

Suddenly my attention was attracted by a weird sight. A pair of hands emerged from the water alongside the boat followed by the top of a head. It was Osceola. Again he had swum underwater. It was a miracle that no alligators or snakes had gotten him. But he was all right. I saw a little blood in the water. He had been hit. How badly I didn't know. He saw me looking at him. He raised his finger to his lips to enjoin silence. Both hands found the gunwale of the boat, on the left side.

Osceola gave a sudden yank and all five of us in the boat were catapulted into the water, the surprised sheriff screaming for help. There was such uproar and confusion that for a moment they thought that I must have done it. Sputtering and shouting and cursing we made our way to the bank. Then someone spotted Osceola, just crawling and dragging himself up the other bank. My heart was filled with pity for him—and admiration for his indomitable courage. He disappeared in the foliage of the dense bushes and was lost to sight. Gunfire crackled toward the spot but there was no answering fire.

I wondered, then, if he was dead. Again the men of the posse fired indiscriminately at the spot in the woods wherein Osceola had disappeared. Still no answering fire.

The sheriff and a couple of men crept closer toward the spot. Becoming emboldened, the sheriff stood up. That was his mistake. A muddy rifle barrel jutted through the bushes. There was one shot and Sheriff Jaspers dropped with a bullet hole right between the eyes.

Instantly a blast of gunfire from the others of the posse flared back and the bullet riddled body of Osceola, a noble Seminole if there ever was one, tumbled from the bushes face down into the mud.

I FELT the pain of the shot—and yet in a way it was a good thing, I thought. Osceola might have gotten away but he would have been always a man hunted, a man fleeing for his life from whatever might overtake him. Always he'd have been worrying about his wife and child, never daring to see them alone, never daring to be seen with them. It was tragic this way, but perhaps better.

The horror of the whole thing was that an innocent family had been disrupted by the hideous activities of a rotten lecher and a beast.

The bodies of Osceola and the sheriff were gathered up and the boats made their way back to dry land. The tragedy was done.

In a way there was a unique satisfaction in the fact that the Seminole had gotten the sheriff, for the sheriff was a lawman in name only, a mere tool of the interests that had appointed him.

I asked a deputy: "Am I under technical arrest?"

He stared at me as if he didn't know what I was talking about. "Naw," he said. "You just come to the inquest." I could see he wanted the affair over with and done with. I couldn't blame him. It was no fun wandering through the swamp.

I left the group and returned to my car which was still parked at the side of the road where I had left it. I got in, turned on the ignition and started it. I threw it in gear, whipped it around and headed back toward town. In a short while I pulled up before Mrs. Shaefer's house.

Slowly I got out of the car and walked toward the door. It was a beautiful morning so characteristic of Florida. There was just the suggestion of a breeze and the sun had not gotten in its intensive licks yet. There was the scent of jasmine in the air from the neighboring flower gardens and anyone would have said it was good to be alive.

All except me that is, for in spite of the fact that I was going to see Ann in a minute, and in spite of the fact that I wasn't harmed by the tragedy that had ensued in the past two days, I felt as if something was pressing me down.

This seemed like a rotten world as I dragged my leaden feet toward Mrs. Shaefer's front door.

The door was flung open and Ann was in my arms. "Oh, darling!" I whispered. I squeezed her to me fiercely as if I'd never let her go.

Ann disengaged herself. "Darling," she said, "what—what—" She faltered as if she dared not bring out the question.

"Yes," I said, "they got him. They shot Osceola just after he killed the sheriff."

Tears sprang into her eyes. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "I'm very sorry. He was good and clean—until that Blodgett . . . Why did it ever have to happen?"

"There's no answer to that," I said. I went into the living room. Mrs. Shaefer knew the answer by just looking at our faces. I nodded. She didn't even question me.

Again Meneola was sitting on the sofa, her baby held in her arms in fierce pride.

"Meneola," I stuttered, and hesitated. "Meneola, your husband was—" I couldn't force out the words. They seemed to stick in my throat.

"Me know. Osceola dead." There was not the trace of a tear in her eyes. She just sat there staring into space and holding her baby a little tighter.

I didn't say any more. There was nothing I could say. I knew of the stoicism reputed to most Indians. This was the first I had seen of it. Inwardly she was as tormented as any soul, but outwardly she would not admit her suffering. How admirable.

"If there is anything I can do . . ." I started to say.

Meneola shook her head. "No," she said. "You help me already. Not forget."

Mrs. Shaefer stepped up and took Ann and myself by the arm.

"Come out to the kitchen," she said. "Leave Meneola alone."

"Leave her with her grief," Ann whispered. I put my arm around Ann's waist and we left the room.

WE SAT down and over cigarettes and coffee, we talked about the affair. I told them what happened in the swamp and how bravely Osceola had died—in such a terrible futile way.

We all felt the horror of it. But Mrs. Shaefer was very sensible.

"Don't worry about Meneola," she said. "I'll take good care of her. I'll see that she stays and works with me as long as she likes. You kids go ahead to Saratoga. You can drop back for a visit any time you want."

"Thanks, Mrs. Shaefer," I said, "for all the help you've been to us—and to Meneola and . . ."

"Tush, it's nothin'," she said. "You two are the ones to be proud of for what you both did."

With the heat of the events somewhat cooled, about all I could do was to hold Ann's hand and marvel at my good fortune. If we hadn't gotten that flat, if Osceola hadn't stopped us for aid, what then? I didn't want to speculate on not having Ann.

We made our farewells with Mrs. Shaefer and Meneola, again with the thousandth assurance from the former that she would take good care of the baby and of Osceola's wife; I knew Meneola couldn't be in better hands. Ann made it clear to Mrs. Shaefer that she was ready to assist her at any time ——in any way—financial or otherwise.

Ann and I got into my car. I started it, threw it in gear and again we resumed the interrupted trip to Saratoga.

Ann started to giggle to herself.

"What's wrong, honey?" I asked, mystified at her humor.

"Bill, darling," she said, "it's a funny world. I didn't admit it to you, but when I was going to Saratoga, I looked forward to a very boring time in the school. I didn't expect anything to happen. And now look!"

"As soon as it's possible, you won't do any more school teaching. I want to change that Miss."

Ann snuggled closer to me.

Perfectly content we soon entered the swampland again, this time to pass through it. As the car traced its familiar path the rush of memories of the past few days assaulted us. Soon we were very near the spot where we had first stopped. The same all-pervading gloom decked the entire scene except perhaps that it was a little less depressing in daylight than at night.

"I hope we don't get another flat . . ." I started to say, and hardly were the words out of my mouth when suddenly there came the sharp popping of air-filled rubber and the right front tire sagged again.

Ann looked at me with alarm in her face.

I had the common but peculiar feeling that this had happened before. As soon as I had pulled the car over to the side of the road, I got out and prepared to change the wheel.

Suddenly it came to me! I walked back along the road until I came to the approximate spot where the tire had blown. I scanned the road closely. Then my eyes caught the glitter of sunlight on metal. I looked closely. Sure enough, it was there. Embedded in the black asphalt, in a narrow crevice and rigidly supported by the walls of the crevice was a three inch nail! I pried it from the pavement with a screw-driver and carried it back to the car.

"Take a look, Ann," I said. "This is the cause of it all. Osceola needed help pretty badly and he was determined to get it."

"But how could he be sure the wheel would hit such a tiny thing?" Ann asked.

"He couldn't. But because the road

is so narrow at that point, it was highly probable that it would work—and besides there's chance."

I was about to flip it away, when Ann saw the intended motion.

"Don't Bill," she said softly. "Give it to me. I want to save it for sentimental reasons."

I took her hand and looked into her eyes. "Yes, darling, for the finding of a nail, a kingdom was found."

"Leave the paraphrasing for me, darling," Ann said, and she kissed me full on the lips.

THE GOLD RUSH OF 1849

★ by H. R. Stanton ★

THE discovery of gold in California was the result of an accident. It was first noticed by James Marshall, who together with John Sutter, owned a sawmill on the South Fork of the American River forty miles from Sacramento. It was in January of 1848 that Marshall found some shiny yellow pieces in the tailrace of the mill. They scooped up a few and took them to Captain Sutter. They worked in secrecy, trying the samples with acid and experimenting with them in many ways till they were certain that they had particles of gold.

Knowledge of their discovery leaked out and it spread from ranch to ranch till it reached the coast. The people were skeptical at first but were soon excited to the point of hysteria, and the mad rush was on as nearly the entire population of northern California rushed to the mines.

The fortunate people that reached the mountains in 1848 found what they thought to be inexhaustible quantities of gold. It was in streams, gravel beds, sand bars, and pot-holes. As word of the richness of the California deposits spread throughout the world, the curious, hopeful, and the adventurous of all nations started out, first by hundreds and then by thousands to try thier luck in the new El Dorado. The increased amount of travel over the main emigrant trails changed these faintly noticeable paths into deeply rutted routes. Even the most inexperienced person could follow these trails, but if a company left the road for a short-cut, they often paid for it with their lives.

There was not so much danger from the Indians during the Gold Rush as in the later fifties. But disease took a terrible toll among those who were not physically fit to endure the months of hardship that the trip entailed. The road was marked, mile after mile, by crude markers and shallow graves.

Inexperience and lack of knowledge as to what would be needed for the journey led thousands of people to start out with a mass of bulky, superfluous equipment, much of which had to be discarded along the way. Many started out with heavy stoves, feather beds, fancy dishes, and one man had several trunks full of white shirts and plug hats. One family was carrying a heavy walnut bedroom suite. Wagons collapsed from overloading and the spokes of the wheels were made into pack saddles. The roads were strewn with a fortune in articles that had to be abandoned.

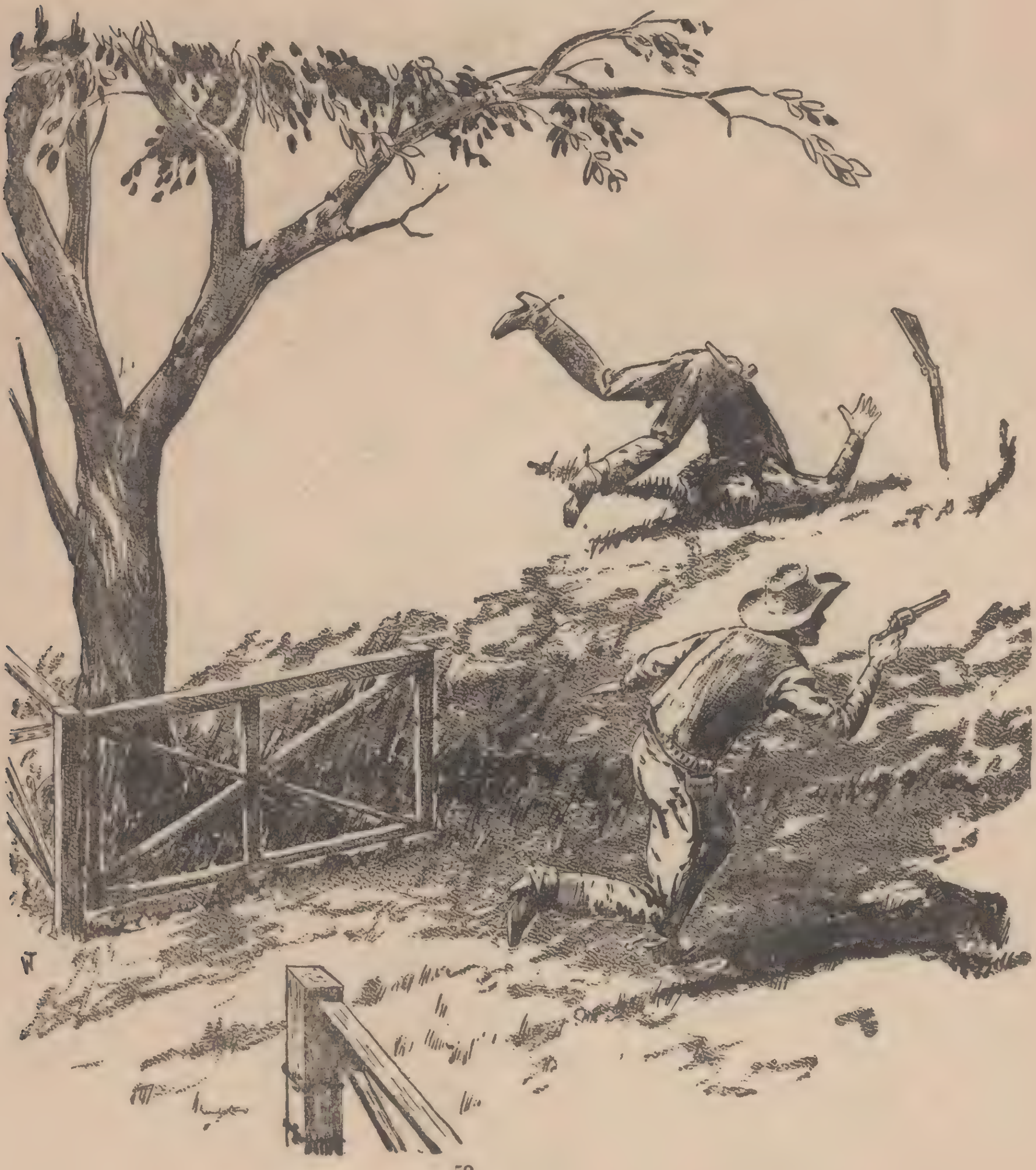
In 1849 and in 1850, scores of poorly outfitted companies reached the foot of the Sierra Neveda Mountains after winter had begun. Most of these companies were without animals for so many had come over the trail before that there was no grass left. The few surviving animals that did get through were just skeletons and of very little use. Passage through the mountains in the winter was a hopeless undertaking. In 1850 ten thousand emigrants were reported stranded east of the Sierra. As word of their plight spread throughout the state, the people were generous and relief trains started off through the mountains with supplies to save the threatened company.

Even with all the hardships and disaster, the trip from the Missouri frontier to California was an event that the Forty-Niners cherished as a priceless memory till the end of their days. They suffered and rejoiced together and got to know their companions, for at a time of extreme hardship, the best and worst in a man comes out and the real person is revealed.

NESTERS DIE HARD

By Paul W. Fairman

You can push a nester around in town, but when it comes to taking his land—come shooting! . . .



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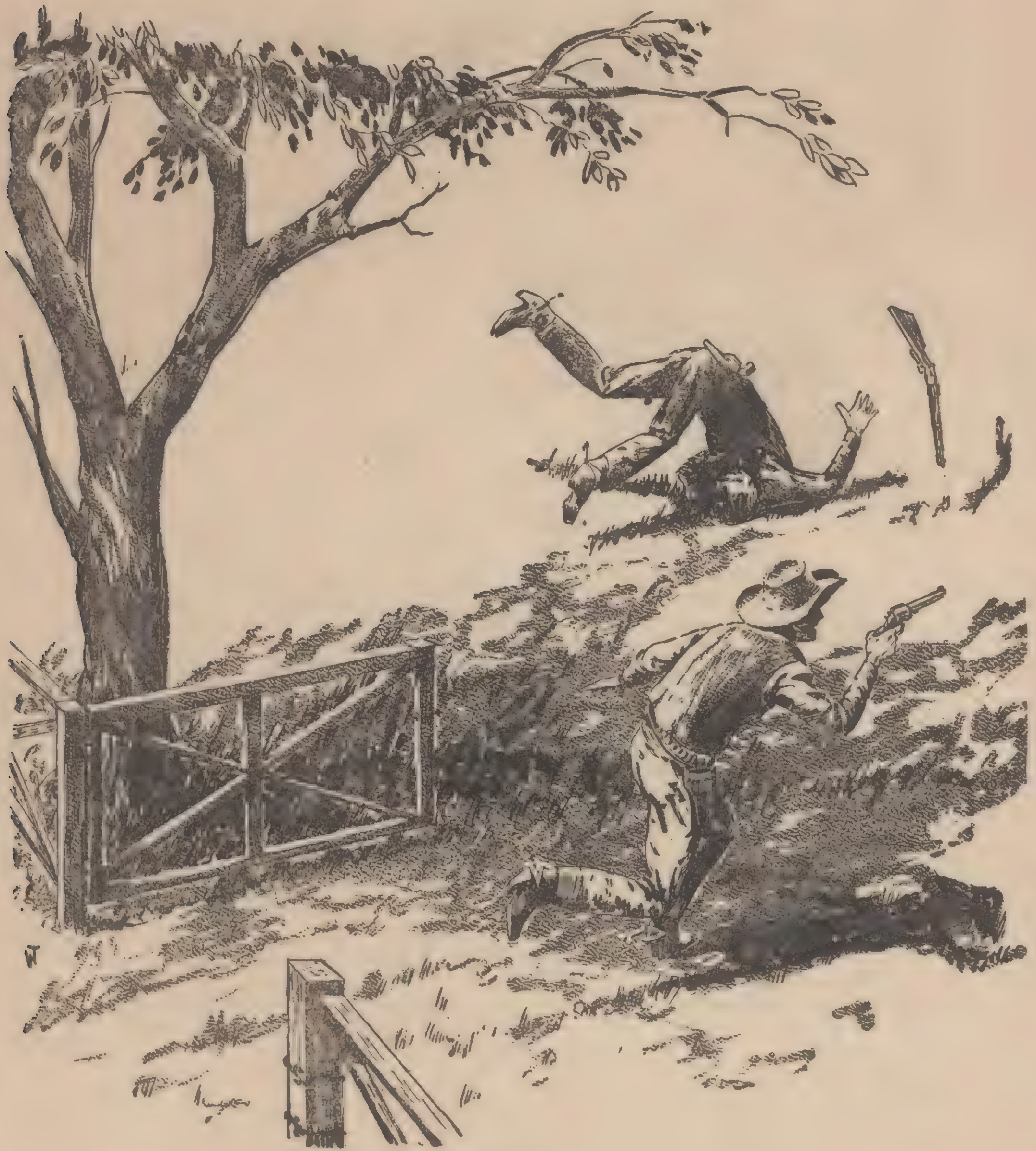
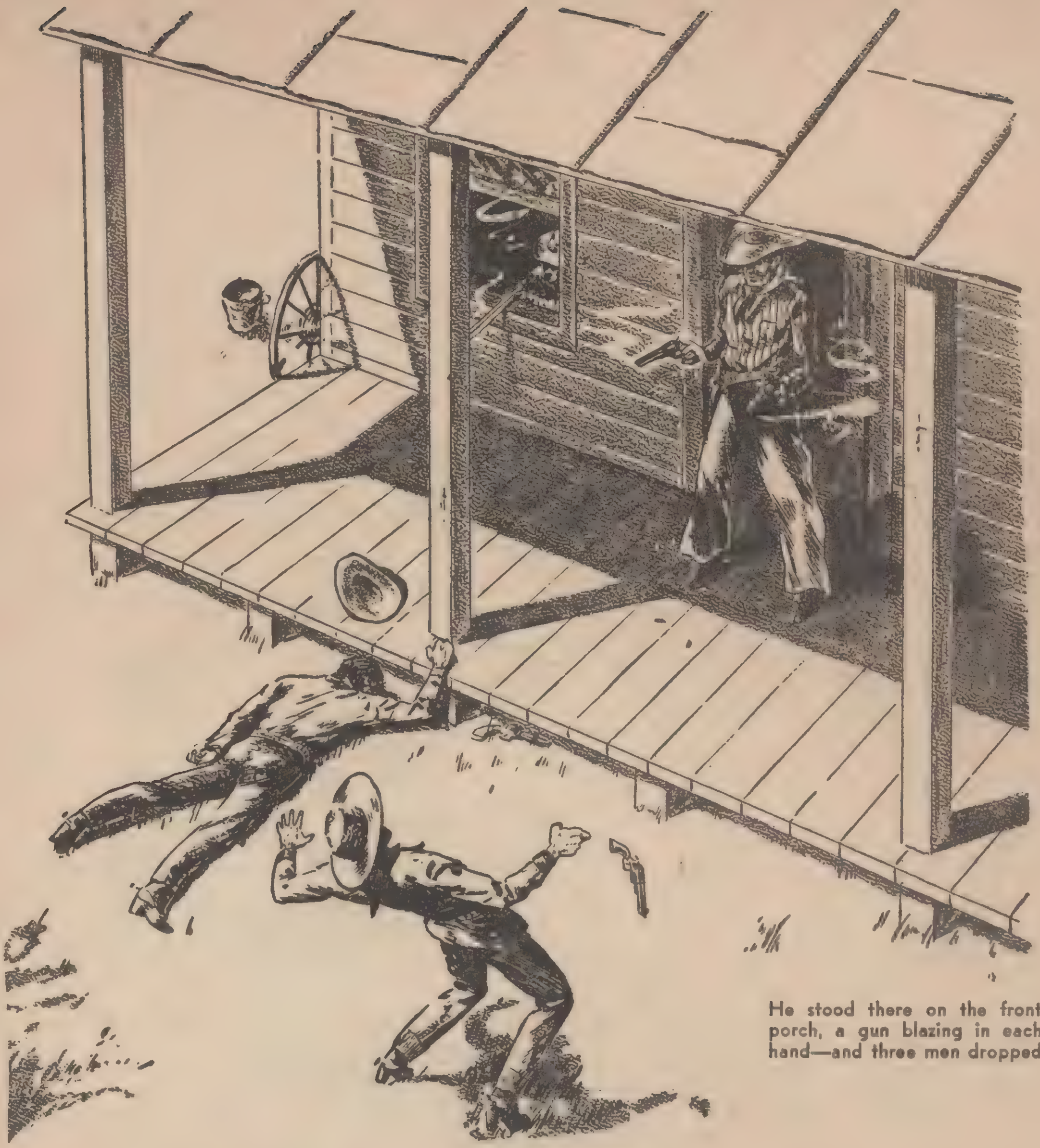


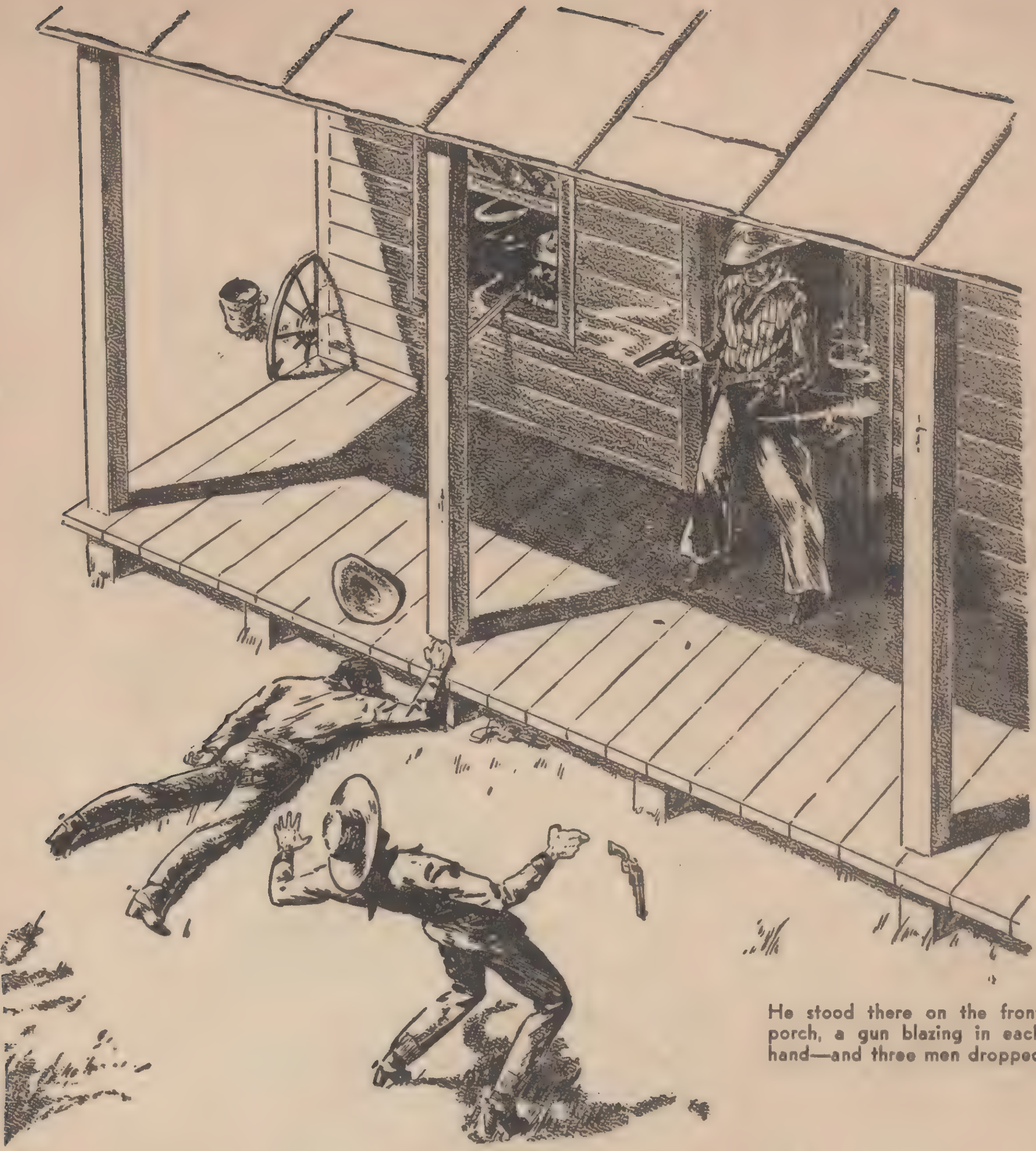


He stood there on the front porch, a gun blazing in each hand—and three men dropped

FROM the outside—from across his broad wheat fields—Jim Cavanaugh's house looked dark and empty. A lonely house, it seemed, on the Texas plains near a corral and a cluster of out-buildings. Above it, fat stars glowed in the black velvet of the night sky, but, from the windows of the house, not one shred of light could be seen.

Yet there were twenty-five men crowded into Jim Cavanaugh's living room waiting for the arrival of the most deadly killer west of the Mississippi.

It was hot and stuffy in the room. With the windows blanketed, the air had turned flat and stale. Yet the men were not restless. They sat quiet as though awed by the audacity of the thing they had done. There was Sam



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Crane, Tom Tellero, Lew Bailey, Vince Lee, and twenty-one others, all bound together in a common cause, in a mutual purpose—that of holding their homes and their land against a force which would drive them off the plains. They were grim-faced, and theirs was the mood of men who would kill in order to survive. They were fighting a last ditch fight. This was war and their mood was one of morose resentment.

Yet they were instinctively men of peace and the cloak of violence fitted them awkwardly. They did not wear it with the nonchalance of true fighting men.

There was desultory talk in low tones; a conversation started only to die, then sprang alive in another part of the room.

"It's been most four hours now," Crane said, nervously. "Think he'll come?"

Crane asked the question of no one in particular. Cavanaugh answered by repeating what everyone present already knew.

"This fellow I contacted in San Antone said he could get in touch with Cal Langtry—said he knew where Cal was hiding out. He went to see Cal and come back with the message that Cal would do the job for five thousand dollars. You—you all know how it went. I give him half, or rather I sent it to him, and he'll collect the rest when he comes here and finishes the job—when he kills Ed Stow."

A high voice burst up from the other side of the room: "It's wrong, damn it! I still say it's wrong! We're law abidin' citizens and we hire an outlaw—a gun slick with a price on his head—to kill our enemy. That makes us outlaws too!"

Another voice: "And hiding here like rats in a hole! Even with the windows covered—and sneaking here in the dead of night!"

Cavanaugh said: "But can't you understand? This is war. And when the law can't protect us, we've got a right to use any method we can. Justice is on our side. Our claims are legal, so we've got a right to be our own law."

"But suppose this Cal Langtry does come tonight—which I doubt—and suppose he does kill Stow, there's still Stow's gun hands and night riders!"

"Without a leader, they'll fall apart," Cavanaugh repied. "That's what we're counting on."

"I still don't like it."

Cavanaugh flared. "Then would you rather have Stow's gunnies stampeding cattle through your fences and buildings? Do you want them to go on burning your wheat fields and endangering the lives of your wife and children? Would you rather load a wagon and move on to where some other cattle king will walk all over you?"

There was no reply and the silence was thick with the heavy thoughts of these men—these law abiding men who were ashamed of what they were doing even though it meant their very existence.

"I don't think he'll come," Vince Lee said, a while later. "I think he took our twenty-five hundred and now he's laughing at us."

Cavanaugh, a big man with a bushy brown beard, shook his head. "He'll come. Cal Langtry's a killer, God knows, but he keeps his word in things like this. He's hired his gun out before. He'll do it again."

"A killer with honor! Why I'll bet—"

There was a sharp knock on the door.

Twenty-five men went suddenly tense. This was it—the moment they had been anticipating—hoping for—dreading. Each reacted within himself after the manner and nature of his own being, and the result was an electric silence. Twenty-five minds balanced on tip-toe. The great Cal Langtry had come. He stood beyond the door and when he came inside, among them, they would be outlaws too.

FEW men in these parts had seen the famous killer—none of those present—and some of them were wondering what he would look like. Close to the soil, they were far from lawlessness, and meeting the fastest draw in the whole southwest was like a glimpse into another world.

The knock sounded again—sharper.

Cavanaugh pushed across the room, opened the door slightly, and looked out.

"Who's there?"

A smooth, mocking voice answered with another question: "Who were you expecting?"

Cavanaugh swung the door back. "Come on in," he said, and stepped aside.

Fifty eyes were on the man who walked into the room. He was slim and dark and appeared to be somewhere in his late thirties. He wore a Stetson low over black eyes and his thumbs were hooked on his belt above two heavy guns worn low.

Cavanaugh closed the door and the man stood, spread-legged, looking over the group. "Quite a prayer meeting," he said. "Afraid the devil's going to crawl in the window?"

No one answered and Cavanaugh said, "You're Langtry?"

The man turned his head and surveyed Cavanaugh levelly. "Let's not have any mistakes about my name. It's Devlin. Lace Devlin. Now and after I'm gone—that's my name. Understand?"

Cavanaugh nodded quickly. "Sure—sure Mr.—Devlin. Just as you say. One name's as good as another and we're mighty glad to see you. Did you get our twenty-five hundred dollars all right?"

"Have I complained about not getting it?"

Cavanaugh was on uncertain ground. He had had no idea of what to expect in Langtry. He was prepared for civility, insolence, or almost anything else, but that didn't make things any easier.

"No offense," he said. "Just wanted to make sure you were the right party."

"I'm the right party. Now how about pulling those blankets off the windows and getting some air in here? It's enough to smother a man."

"We had to protect ourselves," Lew Bailey said. "It's a pretty bad situation around here and Stow's spies are night riding at all hours. We don't want Stow to know about this meeting."

The man who called himself Devlin strode to a window and jerked down the obstructing blanket. "Well, it's almost morning now. Dawn'll crack in a few minutes and there was no one outside. I'll vouch for that."

They watched as he moved to the front of the room and turned to face them. There was an easier atmosphere now, a sense of relief filling the air as though they were now under his protection and were safe. He had about him an aura of confidence and certainty of which they were in sore need.

Cavanaugh opened his mouth to speak, but Devlin held up one hand. "Who's in authority here? Who's ramroding the outfit?"

Faces turned toward Cavanaugh in silent indication.

"Then you're the party who contacted a man in San Antone?"

"That's right," Cavanaugh said. "I——"

"I'll ask the questions and you

answer. Now—who is it you want killed?"

"A man named Stow. A big cattle owner. He's burning our grain and stampeding cattle over our land. Two settlers have been killed by his men."

"Why don't you go to the law?"

Cavanaugh gave a bitter laugh. "The law? That's Paul Kogan, the town marshal. He stays drunk all day in the saloon Stow owns. Kogan can't even sit a horse."

"What proof have you got that Stow is behind your trouble?"

TO THE men, this seemed like strange talk from an outlaw. It bewildered them; even as they were bewildered by that mockery that stayed in his voice. They felt like children being questioned.

"All the proof in the world," Cavanaugh said. "First, he's ordered us off what he calls his range. He says if we don't go he'll see that we don't raise a stalk of grain. Then too, there isn't anybody else who would care a tinker's dam whether we stayed or went. We're not in anybody else's way."

"What damage has been done? Who has been hurt—unlawfully?"

The answer to this came from a dozen throats—a babble of sound. Devlin held up his hand. "One at a time. Let's take some testimony." He pointed to Vince Lee. "You first."

Lee got to his feet. "I got a hundred and eighty acres up north," he said. "About two weeks ago a thousand or so head of cattle were stampeded straight across my place. They beat sixty acres of good wheat plumb into the ground."

"Maybe it was an accident. A bolt of lightning might of started it."

Lee scowled. "Maybe, but a bolt of lightning couldn't have sent me a note next day telling me the cattle would be back if I didn't get out."

Devlin glanced out the window. Dawn had broken and the world was filled with feeble gray light. "Anybody else had their crops trampled? Raise your hands."

A dozen hands went up in silence. Cavanaugh stared silently at the imported gunman. What was behind this questioning? Was he intending a double-cross? Maybe this was his way of finding out how big a gouge he could make. Cavanaugh was suddenly frightened at what he had done. The nesters had climbed on the tiger and maybe they wouldn't be able to get off.

"I heard something about fires, too." Devlin said.

"That's right," Tom Tellero called out. "Six of us has had night fires started. Never in the daytime. That varmint's gang drags burning gunny sacks through the fields. Then they take pot shots at us when we come to put them out."

"Anyone been killed?"

There was a moment of dead silence. Then Cavanaugh said, "Will Brady was found shot in the back, hanging over his plow last week. Two bullets."

"Was Stow responsible?"

"What do you think?"

Devlin pushed the Stetson back off his forehead. This revealed ringlets of black curly hair and made him look young, attractive, inexperienced. Then he dropped suddenly onto a chair and slid one of the big .44s into his palm. He stared at the gun, seeming not to see it. He broke it absently, squinted into the cylinder, snapped it shut. They watched him in fascination, and with a certain fear.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

Cavanaugh answered nervously. "Why—why we figured the only way to save ourselves is to have Stow dead. We want him killed."

"You want me to walk up and draw on him—is that it?"

"That's—it. That's what we've half paid you for."

Devlin grinned from some secret amusement. "What are my chances of catching him alone?"

"Not too good. His gang sticks pretty close to him. But—well, you've killed men before in crowds. We didn't think you'd worry much about that."

"Besides you took our money," Lew Bailey cut in. "You took half the pay in advance and made a deal."

DEVLIN turned his eyes on the man. The eyes darkened and chilled. "What makes you think an outlaw sticks to a deal?"

"Then why did you come? You going to stick us up and clean us out?"

Devlin sneered. "What are you? A bunch of men or a pack of prairie gophers? Twenty or thirty of you sitting here scared one man will stick you up? Haven't you ever heard of fighting for your rights?"

There was shuffling of feet and sullen faces.

"We're farmers," someone finally said. "We ain't fighters. That's why we hired you."

"Farmers—miners—beer hall bums! What difference does that make? Even a cur mongrel will fight if you back it into a corner and kick it?"

"You're asking, I guess," Cavanaugh said, "why we haven't gunned Stow down ourselves?"

"Maybe."

"Let's put it this way. If we had there wouldn't be any work for you."

Devlin grinned again. "Tell me about this man Stow. Where does he spend his time? Where can I usually find him?"

"He owns the Poker Chip, a saloon over in Blue Sky. That'd be your best bet. You can catch him there when he isn't out at his Flat Circle spread."

"Is he a fast draw?" Devlin's voice had turned lazy now under what was almost a smile. He seemed to be baiting them again.

"I wouldn't think you'd be worrying about that. He certainly ain't as fast as some of the men you've killed."

"The men I've killed," Devlin repeated softly. "I—what the hell?"

He sprang from his chair, as did everyone else who was seated, and jumped toward a window. Dawn had become a reality and the silence of early morning had been broken by a thunder of quick hoof-beats.

The sound deepened, and the nesters saw a large group of riders come galloping up the road. They were obviously heading for the Cavanaugh place.

"Stow and his cutthroats," Tellero gasped. What's he up to?"

No one had a reply as they watched the horsemen pull up about five hundred yards from the house and start milling.

"That's Stow on the big black," Cavanaugh told Devlin. Devlin spotted a big, authoritative looking man in the middle of the group. He wore black, matching the horse's coat, and a snowy white Stetson. "Tough looking hombre," Devlin observed. "Must have all of forty riders with him. And he knows something too. This isn't just a casual visit."

As the nesters watched, a single rider trotted forward away from the main body. He came toward the house, carrying a white handkerchief tied to the end of a six gun. They waited.

The rider pulled up a hundred feet from the front door. His horse reared and danced in a circle. Then the animal settled back and stood quietly.

"That's Paul Kogan," Cavanaugh muttered.

"The town marshal?"

"Yeah. And he looks right sobered up."

"Wait. He's going to say something."

Kogan slid the handkerchief off his gun and dropped the gun into its leather. "You in there!" he yelled.

No one answered.

"You nesters inside! You might as well talk up. We know you're there."

Silence.

"All right. I'll call you by name. Cavanaugh, Tellero, Bailey, Higgins, Wilson. You came here the middle of last night. We know all about it and we know the reason for the meeting."

Devlin shrugged. "Might as well talk to him."

CAVANAUGH went to the door and opened it a crack. Then he pushed it wider and stood in the doorway. "What are you and that gang doing here, Kogan?" he called.

"That's better," Kogan answered. "I'll make it short and sweet. There's a killer in amongst you there. Cal Langtry came last night. You're harboring a murderer and that makes all of you criminals in the sight of the law. We'll give you five minutes to march out with your hands in the air—Langtry with you. Then I'll take you to jail and you'll get a fair trial. Otherwise we'll shoot you down where you stand."

A murmur went up among the trapped men inside. Cavanaugh stood in the grip of uncertainty.

"No use trying to fool them," Devlin said. "Something leaked out and they know all about your plan. Tell them you want a few minutes to talk it over."

Cavanaugh did so and Kogan said. "All right. But hurry up. And see you make the right decision."

Cavanaugh came back inside and closed the door. He was met by a bleak grin on the face of Devlin.

"You know how this adds up don't you?" Devlin asked.

All the men were silent, watching their leader and the famous gun slick.

"I—I guess so," Cavanaugh said.

"Like hell you do! You've been dry gulched for fair and don't figure it otherwise. They've got the law on their side and either way the cat jumps you lose—all of you."

"They can't—they can't put twenty-five men in jail if we surrender," Lew Bailey quavered. He was a dried-up little oldster and there was fear in his eyes.

"Surrender?" Devlin lashed. "Don't be a fool! You start walking out that door and you'll be mowed down like sheep in a slaughter pen. This is Stow's chance to get rid of all of you and the law will have to back him up because he's riding with the marshal. You think he'll let any of you get back to town alive?"

"But all the marshal wants is you," Sam Crane said.

"Sure they want me, but I'm just an excuse to get you men. My being here puts you outside the law according to Kogan. They'll mow you down and say you resisted arrest."

"What—what we going to do?"

"Do? You're going to do what any other men would do in this spot. Fight! You've all backed up as far as you can. Your backs are against the wall and now, by God, you've got to be men and live or die with a gun in your hand."

There was silence again. Devlin grinned coldly. "What are you afraid of? You're all armed. You can give as much as you'll take and everybody dies some day."

Cavanaugh's fists were doubled. "I'll fight for my land," he said. "And so will the rest of you. Devlin's right. We'll die fighting or running so there isn't much choice."

That stiffened them somewhat and stopped the peace talk. Devlin's thin grin was a permanent fixture on his face now. "Tell him he lies," Devlin said. "Tell him you're peaceably assembled and that you'll defend yourselves to the last man. Say Langtry isn't here."

This feeble lie seemed foolish to Cavanaugh, but he relayed the information to the waiting sheriff.

"Cal Langtry's in there with you. We saw him enter," Kogan called back. "We saw him go in and we know he ain't come out."

"Pretty efficient spy system," Devlin observed. "Tell him to go to hell."

"We'll resist," Cavanaugh yelled. "Come and take us!" There was sudden excitement in his words. Now that the die was cast a feeling of fierce satisfaction swept through him and it spread to the other settlers in the room.

"If that's your answer, Cavanaugh, your blood will be on your own heads!" Paul Kogan wheeled his horse and rode away with more haste than seemed necessary.

Devlin, watching him go, said, "You're legally in the clear. Remember that. No one, not even a marshal, can search your house without a writ."

Cavanaugh frowned. "I wonder how Stow knew about our plans?"

"I can tell you, but there's no time now," Devlin said. He turned toward the men. "All right—let's get set. Three men to a window. There are enough rifles to cover. Divide them so there's one at each window. You other men use your side arms. I'll cover the whole house. Anyone gets in trouble just yell and I'll come."

THEY went clumping through the house, distributing themselves at the openings. Devlin crouched at a front window with Cavanaugh. They saw Paul Kogan pull his horse up beside Ed Stow. They saw Kogan gesture toward the house.

"They don't care about not having proceeded lawfully," Devlin said, "because, with no witnesses left on our side, that can all be fixed up later. And they don't expect to leave any witnesses."

Cavanaugh did not answer. His eyes were on Ed Stow as the big cattleman deployed his horsemen. Small bunches began circling the house. It was evident that they meant to move in from all directions. Soon only Stow, the marshal, and two other riders remained at the original stopping place. In a great circle, all around the house and in the shelter of the outbuildings, men were dismounting, armed with rifles and six-guns.

"Let them fire first," Devlin called. "Hold up 'til they open fire."

The wait was a short one. To the west a man dropped to one knee and sent a vagrant shot toward the house. "That's it!" Devlin yelled.

He was up and over to the west side of the room—down on his knees at the window.

A rifle was put into his hands. He knocked a hole in the glass, settled on one knee and cuddled the butt against his cheek. The settlers waited. Then the big gun spoke and the sound thundered in their ears.

Out in the west wheat field the man who had fired that first shot threw his rifle into the air, came to his feet and spun around in one agonized motion. Then he fell. Devlin had pumped the lever and the gun roared again. Another of Stow's men plowed his face into the soft ground and the rest of the westward contingent dived to the earth and lay flat.

Devlin lowered the rifle. There was about him the look of a happy man.

"Dead center on both," he shouted. "That's the way to do it, you plow pushing squatters! Get in there and fight! Point your guns straight and pull the triggers and God'll take care of everything else!" He raised his head and let out a blood curdling whoop and the rest of the ambushed men galvanized into sudden action. They had seen a killer at work and it gave them a sort of intoxication.

"Give 'em hell!" Devlin screamed.

He pushed the rifle back into a settler's hands and began making the rounds from window to window. At each place he snatched a rifle and shot at the attackers. At a window on the south side of the house, he fired two shots, then poked his head out and yelled: "Come on you bow-legged, two dollar gun sharps! Come on and earn your blood money! This is no jack rabbit hunt! Let's see what you're made of!"

His bravado was having an effect inside the house. Rifles were giving out thunder at all the windows. Small arms were cracking and chattering. The house was full of gun smoke and twenty-five peace-loving men had suddenly become twenty-five killers.

They didn't look like the men who had crept into this house a few hours before.

CAVANAUGH took time out to glance at Devlin. The man interested him. He saw Devlin in an unguarded moment. The gunman was grim faced, eyes darting around the room, gauging the results of his own actions upon the nesters. And suddenly Cavanaugh knew that Devlin's yelling and bravado were not spontaneous. He had carefully and deliberately sought to inflame the besieged men. He had succeeded and he was satisfied with his work.

Cavanaugh watched him move to the window beside the front door, heard him give an order: "Hold your fire on this side, men. Just keep an eye out. I want 'em to get confident and maybe move up on us across that front yard. Let me know if they start coming in."

Outside there had been retreat and new thought on the situation. Stow's men had hardly expected this resistance. It didn't seem logical that a bunch of cringing nesters could turn into a squad of deadly killers at the drop of a hat. There were groups forming back out of rifle range, talking things over.

Devlin was squatting beside Cavanaugh, surveying the east approach. Firing had stopped. "Maybe they're through," Cavanaugh said, hopefully. "Maybe we scared 'em off."

Devlin shook his head. "Not yet. They'll try again, and again. They don't quit this easy."

He was right. Five minutes later hell broke out to the south. From the shelter of the out-buildings a hail of lead began pounding into the house. Tom Tellero, at the south window dropped his gun, grabbed at his chest and screamed.

He went down to the floor, writhing, as Devlin came and knelt beside him. A minute later Devlin called, "Here's one to even up, men. They got Tellero. He's dead. You going to let them get away with killing your friend? Lay it on!"

He went to the south window and took the rifle. Squinting over the sill he said, "See that knot hole there at the corner of the barn? That's where it came from. Now watch and I'll show you how to shoot a killer's eye out."

He raised the gun and sighted. It roared and bucked. From around the corner of the barn a man came staggering with his hands clawing at his face. But he was already dead. He'd been dead before the reflex action had brought him to his feet and sent his hands up to his eye.

"Right through the knot hole without cutting a splinter. Here, take this gun and find some more knot holes."

From the front side of the room, Sam Crane called, "Hey, Langtry. Come here. They think this side's unprotected and they're creepin' up. What'll we do?"

Devlin surveyed the situation. "Swell," he muttered.

There were four men inching along the front fence. Their move was apparent. Get as close as possible and rush the front porch. Once in close they could slaughter the nesters at close range. Maybe storm inside the house itself.

Devlin was grinning. "Get set to open the door when I yell," he told Crane. "You—Higgins—keep watch and tell me when they come up on their feet for the rush."

He'd stopped grinning. He had the two big .44's in his fists. A cigarette dangled, forgotten, from the corner of his mouth. He stood in a slight crouch, acrid powder smoke curling around him.

Cavanaugh turned his head and got a glimpse. "Just like something out of hell," he muttered. But he felt a sudden warm feeling along his spine.

"They're up!" Higgin's shouted.

"Open it!"

The door swung open and Devlin went through it in one leap, landing solid on the porch. As his soles hit the wood his two guns were blazing—waist high.

Four men had come to their feet and were charging the house. They stopped and their guns came up as Devlin calmly mowed them down. Inside, Higgins shuddered as he watched the slaughter—saw the four men go down as though chopped off at the ankles with an invisible axe. They lay still, in various grotesque postures while Devlin stood there blowing into the barrel of his right hand gun.

FIVE hundred yards away Ed Stow sat on his horse. Devlin laughed and waved a gun toward him. "Come on, grease belly," Devlin yelled. "Come on up and get into the game. The shooting's fine!"

Then he turned and walked back into the house and Cavanaugh saw the fierceness drop from him like a cape. Cavanaugh was sure now that his every move and word was for a definite purpose.

And the results could be seen from the window. Men were circling the house outside rifle range. They were stopping to gaze at the four dead men in the front yard. They were talking among themselves and drifting toward Ed Stow.

Devlin squatted down beside Cavanaugh. During the lull other nesters were looking to their own wounded. Bailey was on the floor fighting with two men, a slug through his shoulder.

"Lemme up!" he snarled. "Lemme up you damn fools! There's nothin' wrong with me! Get to those windows and do some gun work!"

Devlin, hearing, grinned swiftly. Cavanaugh understood. Devlin's spirit and leadership had turned the nesters into fighters. And Devlin had intended to do just that.

Two other men were pulling a young settler named Pratt in off the window sill. He'd slumped down with a bullet in his brain. Lee had a crease in his head and was out cold. They wiped the blood away and found a broken skull, but Lee still breathed.

There were two punctured arms in the group and a chest wound but there was no complaining.

Devlin's eyes were on the circling men who were now converging on Stow and the marshal.

"They're making a few complaints," Devlin said. "They're claiming Stow didn't say anything about the bunch of six-armed wildcats in here. Stow will offer them more money. They'll either take it or they won't. We'll see."

The action around Stow was spirited. His gunmen were in an ugly mood. They waved their arms and made threatening gestures under Stow's nose.

Stow was talking fast. He had probably never talked faster. After five minutes of it, the men dispersed.

"Look," Cavanaugh said. "There comes Kogan again waving his handkerchief again. He's riding in close."

Devlin grunted. "How stupid do they think we are?"

Kogan pulled up as before. "I'm giving you men a last chance," he shouted, "and you'd better take it. Otherwise we'll kill you like rats. If you come out with your hands in the air, what I said before still holds. You'll get a fair trial."

Devlin had opened the door and was standing there with his hands on his hips. "You mean we'll be easy marks for your gunners. We're doing all right. Let's cut this out and get back to work."

"These killings will be held against you unless you give up now."

Devlin was laughing. "You mean if we give up they won't be?"

Kogan revealed his desperation. "Yes."

"Why you lying lard bucket! We wouldn't get five feet off this porch if we walked out and I can prove it."

"How?"

"This way: We'll agree to surrender if you'll give us hostages."

"Hostages?"

"That's right. You and Ed Stow walk in here unarmed and march out with us. We'll all come out then, without our guns. All except me. I'll carry one six gun trained right between your ears and if anyone starts shooting you won't be around to see who gets hit. Fair enough?"

Kogan let out with an explosive oath. He was holding the gun erect with the handkerchief tied to it and Devlin could see that he was struggling to keep from using it.

"We'll kill every stinking one of you squatters! And you too, Langtry!"

Devlin laughed harshly. "You intended to kill us anyway so you'd better offer your gun hands some big bonuses. The going will be pretty rough from here on."

KOGAN reversed his horse and started away as Devlin yelled, "Why don't you try leading a charge right through the front window?" Then he went back inside and closed the door.

His face was grim and somber. "Get ready for anything, men. Just remember that you've got nothing to lose and everything to gain by fighting."

"Lee's dead," Cavanaugh told him, briefly.

"That's too bad. We're about ten up on them. Let's make it twenty."

The men crouched at the windows, waiting. There was activity out in the fields. Suddenly Devlin fathomed it. "They're going to try and burn us out! Look at that!"

Cavanaugh looked. At two points—to the southeast and the southwest a pair of horsemen were getting set. At a given signal each man was handed a flaming gunny sack.

"They'll come by the front and try to toss the fire in against the house," Devlin said. "Give me a rifle and open the door."

He dropped to one knee and waited. "Those boys are riding for at least a thousand bucks apiece, and if they get that fire in here, we're through."

The nesters were silent. They were moving toward the front room. "Get back there," Devlin barked. "Watch your windows!"

The men scurried back. Outside a signal of some kind was given and the two riders spurred their horses and started toward the house at a wide angle. The house was halfway between them. They would pass close to the front yard at the same time, if their plan worked. They hung low on the far sides of their mounts, thus offering no targets.

"Those are nice horses," Devlin sighed. "Too bad."

His long gun spoke and the west mount went down, sliding along on its neck. Its rider went off and got tangled with the burning sack, his face plunging full into it. He screamed and rolled away on the ground, slapping at his face, tearing at his hair.

Devlin turned his attention to the east rider, but that one had swung sharply away from the house and was riding toward Stow and Kogan.

"Going back to ask for two thousand," Devlin said dryly. "He figures the trip's worth it and he's right."

The incident of the fire brought a sharp change in the morale of the attackers. Again they began converging on Stow and the marshal. Faint sounds of what were obviously bitter recriminations drifted toward the embattled house and in the smashed windows.

The nesters watched and saw that Stow had his hands full. Then they saw the gun hands put their wounded on horses and start off across the fields.

"That's what happens when you hire guns," Devlin observed. "They leave the dead where they drop."

"They're pointed toward Stow's spread," Cavanaugh stated. "They're going home. Maybe for reinforcements."

Devlin shook his head. "They're through. Look. Stow and the marshal aren't going with them. They're traveling toward town."

"That's right. Stow must have some business at the Poker Chip."

"And I think I know what that business might be," Devlin said. "You and I will tag along behind. Maybe we can clean this thing up for good."

Devlin started for the door and Cavanaugh followed without question. And it occurred to Cavanaugh that he would take any orders from Devlin, even though they entailed moving through the gates of hell and jousting with the devil himself.

At the door, a nester held up his hand. "Just a second, Mr. Langtry—or Mr. Devlin," he said. He seemed nervous, embarrassed. "The boys wanted me to say somethin'—somethin' to show—"

"What is it?" Devlin asked.

"Well it's just that—that we know you're an outlaw with a price on your head, but, for our money you're all right. Nobody'll take you while we got guns to stop 'em. Any time you need us—day or night—we'll be here."

Devlin smiled swiftly as his eyes warmed. He said, "Thanks. Looks to me as though the cattle kings are fighting a losing war. I think you boys are here to stay."

He walked from the house and Cavanaugh followed. He turned. "You men better stay here until Cavanaugh gets back. It won't be long. Two or three hours. He'll bring you the news."

Of the horses in the barn, they found that two had been wounded and then dispatched by the attackers. They saddled a pair and loped off down the road toward Poker Chip. Devlin wore his two .44's. Cavanaugh carried a rifle.

AN HOUR later they were on the outskirts of the town. They pulled up.

"Dead, ain't it?" Cavanaugh said.

The town seemed deserted. No one walked the short main street. What shutters there were had been closed and barred. Cavanaugh stared at the shoddy little village and got the impression of a dog, crouching, waiting to be whipped—then he thought of a mountain cat waiting to spring. There was something sinister in the unnatural emptiness of the place.

"Everybody's hiding out," Devlin said. "They heard about the war and figured it would maybe spread to town. They've holed up 'til it's over."

Cavanaugh nodded.

"Which is the Poker Chip?" Devlin asked.

Cavanaugh indicated a large building with an imposing porch and a sign hanging out over the street—hanging motionless under the blazing noon sun.

"Let's go in on foot," Devlin said.

They walked up the dusty street. No sounds. No movement.

They skirted the Poker Chip side of the street and came up beside it. I'm going in the front door," Devlin said. "You try this alley and maybe find a window. I'll see you."

He moved on, vaulted a railing and was on the porch. The batwings sagged a little in the center. A path had been worn in the soft pine across the porch and under the doors.

Devlin moved along the wall, set himself and leaped through the door, veering sharply to the left inside and went down into a crouch.

Two men, seated at a table, didn't move. They sat with their hands in sight, their faces expressionless. Devlin turned a gun their way. It centered on Paul Kogan. Devlin's eyes flashed around the room. Except for the two men it appeared to be empty.

Kogan said. "Come to give yourself up, huh? Thought you'd be along. Just lay your guns on the table."

The other man, slim and dark faced, said nothing. Only his eyes seemed alive.

"Where's Stow?" Devlin asked.

"He went to his spread. He's checking up to see how many murder charges we've got against you."

Devlin was puzzled. He moved slowly toward the table. There had been only two horses at the rack in front. Maybe—

A sixth sense gave him warning. Suddenly he went limp, dropped to the floor and rolled toward the wall. As he came over on his shoulders the two .44's spat flame and smoke and a half-dozen holes appeared in the side of the bar just under the mahogany top.

The thunder echoed. There was a thin, high scream, then a dead pause. Now the top of a hat was pushed up from behind the bar. A face came in view—a face twisted in agony. Glazed eyes stared out of the face—at nothing.

The shoulders came next, and the arms and the barrel of a rifle. Ed Stow got himself erect and Devlin could see the widening splashes of red on his chest and stomach.

Then Stow collapsed forward, across the bar. As he slipped from sight there was the tinkle of breaking glass and a voice said, "Just don't move a peg, that's all. Just don't move." It was Cavanaugh's voice.

He stood with his rifle across the window sill trained on the two men at the table. Each had a gun in his hand now, ready to throw down. But the barrels pointed toward the ceiling and neither man moved.

"Who's the dark gent?" Cavanaugh asked. "Ain't never seen him before."

Devlin was on his feet, holstering one gun. "That," he said, his voice stinging with contempt, "is the great Cal Langtry."

CAVANAUGH'S face was a study in bewilderment. His jaw dropped as Devlin went to the table after the guns. He threw them behind the bar and said, "Guess that about caps it. Hello Langtry."

The man called Langtry scowled.

Cavanaugh got his jaw back up and said, "But—if that's Langtry—who the hell are you?"

Devlin grinned. "Just who I said I was. Lace Devlin. Texas Ranger and I've been after this galoot for a year. Now I've got him."

"Then—then he crossed us! He took our money and hightailed it right to Ed Stow and threw in with him!"

"You men should have had more sense. What did you expect from a cut-throat, knife-in-the-back black leg like Langtry?"

"Well I'll be—"

"I got word about your deal in San Antone and came up here. I didn't come for any range war. I just wanted to get Langtry but I sure stepped into something."

The little dark man spoke for the first time. It was a snarl. "If I could have met you man to man," he grated, "I could out draw you the best day you ever lived, Devlin."

"How come you were so long legged then? I was always right after you. Why didn't you stop and draw?"

Kogan's eyes were on Langtry. They blazed hatred. "You sidewinder! You didn't say anything about his being a ranger. You said—"

"You're starting your lies too early," Devlin said. "Wait for the circuit judge we'll send up. You knew all about it. You figured we'd all be dead out there and there'd be no witnesses. With nobody to testify against it your claim of mistaken identity would hold. You'd get away with slaughtering all the nesters. Looks as though you're heading for a hangman's noose now."

Kogan was sweating. Langtry's face was twisted. "Lucky we didn't meet gun to gun, Ranger—that's all."

Devlin's eyes went thoughtful. He turned to Cavanaugh. "I'll show you something about this Langtry you didn't know. Something maybe you ought to know."

Devlin turned to Langtry. "On your feet," he snapped.

Langtry got up. "Going to shoot me down in cold blood? That's about your speed."

"Turn your back this way."

"I'll take it in front."

"Turn around!"

Langtry turned slowly. When he was facing the other way, Devlin stepped up and pushed one of the .44's into Langtry's empty holster. Then Devlin backed away across the room.

From near the front door he called. "All right, killer. Keep your hands in the air and turn back."

Langtry came around to find himself facing Devlin. Devlin's hands were also in the air. He stood spreadlegged, waiting, a grin on his face. He said, "Any time you're ready, Langtry—just reach. It's a good gun and it's loaded. You're on your own!"

Cavanaugh stared in silence. Kogan seemed dazed, unable to comprehend what was going on.

"If Langtry gets me he goes free, Cavanaugh. You understand that?" Devlin said.

Cavanaugh croaked an affirmative answer. He pulled the rifle back.

Langtry's face had gone white. His

mouth was twisting.

"Come on," Devlin said. "Let's see that fast draw."

Langtry opened his mouth and forced out some words:

"I—I ain't drawin' against you—Devlin. I ain't drawin'."

Devlin's answer was a sneer. "The great Langtry! Pull that gun out of your leather. Slow."

Langtry's hand went down. He pulled the .44. It hung loose in his grip.

"Now you've got an edge. Throw down!"

"I ain't drawin' against you, Devlin." He threw the gun toward the bar and folded his arms.

Devlin turned his head toward Cavanaugh. "See what damn fools you nesters were?"

"I see. I sure do see," Cavanaugh said, slowly.

THE END

CANADIAN PIONEERS

★ by Fran Ferris ★

DO WE ever stop to think that Canada, like the United States, opened up its western frontiers the hard way? In fact, it was the *harder* way. While it is true that the resources of western Canada at the time our country was being opened up were not the same, the main reason that Canada didn't go through quite the same phases as we did, was simply the fact that there was Winter to contend with! There are all kinds of winters, but few can compare with the bitterness and intense cold that sweeps the vast stretches of western Canadian territories.

There was not the wholesale migration of settlers to western Canada. Rather it was a matter of a few individuals striking out. Occasionally whole communities would be settled and towns would spring up, but these events were far fewer and more infrequent than in our country.

Probably the best history of the opening of western Canada is told in the annals of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, who are for the most part neither royal nor mounted. Regardless, those annals tell tales of heroism and sacrifice incredible in their intensity.

Who has not heard of Joseph Crathorn, a citizen of Halifax, who decided in the summer of 1894 to go west—west in Canada that is. A skilled trapper and forester, he made his way into British Columbia without too much difficulty. In fact he was so adaptable to conditions that before long he had a flourishing fur trade and was respected and honored particularly by a group of Indians who had settled in his region after leaving the reservations of the United States.

Nevertheless, his little idyll of happiness was soon broken up. One morning, an agent for the fur trade, William Omondy, came upon his cabin and found therein the cruelly butchered body of Joseph Crathorn. He immediately reported the affair to Police headquarters and men were dispatched to the scene.

Robbery obviously had been the motive. A vast stock of furs and pelts had been taken, and it was clear that disposing of them would be no simple task. Apparently all the police had to do was to watch the traders, and when someone unloaded a catch, examine and question him.

In spite of the utmost diligence and effort on the part of the police, nothing was discovered about the matter and the murderer and robber of William Crathorn went scot free for many years.

Some seven years after the event, in the same police post, on a bitter winter night a ragged trapper staggered in, and asked for shelter. As was the hospitable custom of the time, the police put the man up.

The next morning he asked to see the magistrate. Brought before him, he said his name was Henry Lacartouche, and that he was a former friend of Joseph Crathorn's. Crathorn's name had never left the police officers' minds—no case is ever closed in the R.C.M.P.—and as calmly as could be, the officer drew a confession from the man for a crime committed seven years before. When asked why he had done the horrible deed, Henry Lacartouche said only that now his conscience bothered him and that he had been unable to sleep. He felt that he had to expiate his crime. The police obliged him and he soon went on trial, where he was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Such crimes were all too common in the isolated wilderness that made up Canada, but they were certainly no more frequent than those that assailed the citizens of our western towns.

THE FUR TRADERS

★ by June Lurie ★

REPORTS brought back from the Lewis and Clark expedition about fur-laden streams and lakes, and large mountain regions rich in game, excited American trappers and traders. St. Louis was then the frontier, and from there many trapping parties outfitted themselves and set out to make their fortune in trapping or trading with the Indians. They had to travel in groups for protection against the Indians.

The first fur company was called the Missouri Fur Company of 1807 under the leadership of Manuel Lisa. Their post was at Fort Manuel at the mouth of the Big Horn. Three years later the same company sent out a stronger party under Andrew Henry to start another post at the Three Forks of the Missouri. They had gathered several hundred packs of furs when the Blackfeet, who were well stocked with rifles supplied to them by the British traders, attacked Henry's men killing five, and making off with all their furs, traps, and ammunition and horses. The men were discouraged, and so they left that region in favor of the land of the Shoshones.

They built another post at what is since known as Henry's fork at the point where the Teton River joins a branch of the Snake. This was the first American post west of the Rockies. But the determined Blackfeet crossed the mountains and continued their attacks on the Americans till Henry and most of his men went back to Missouri.

Three of the men were determined to stay and get furs in spite of the Blackfeet. They were from Kentucky and named Hoback, Rezner, and Robinson. Robinson had already lost his scalp to the Indians when he was fighting with Daniel Boone. He used a kerchief for a scalp and continued to go right on leading a dangerous life in the West.

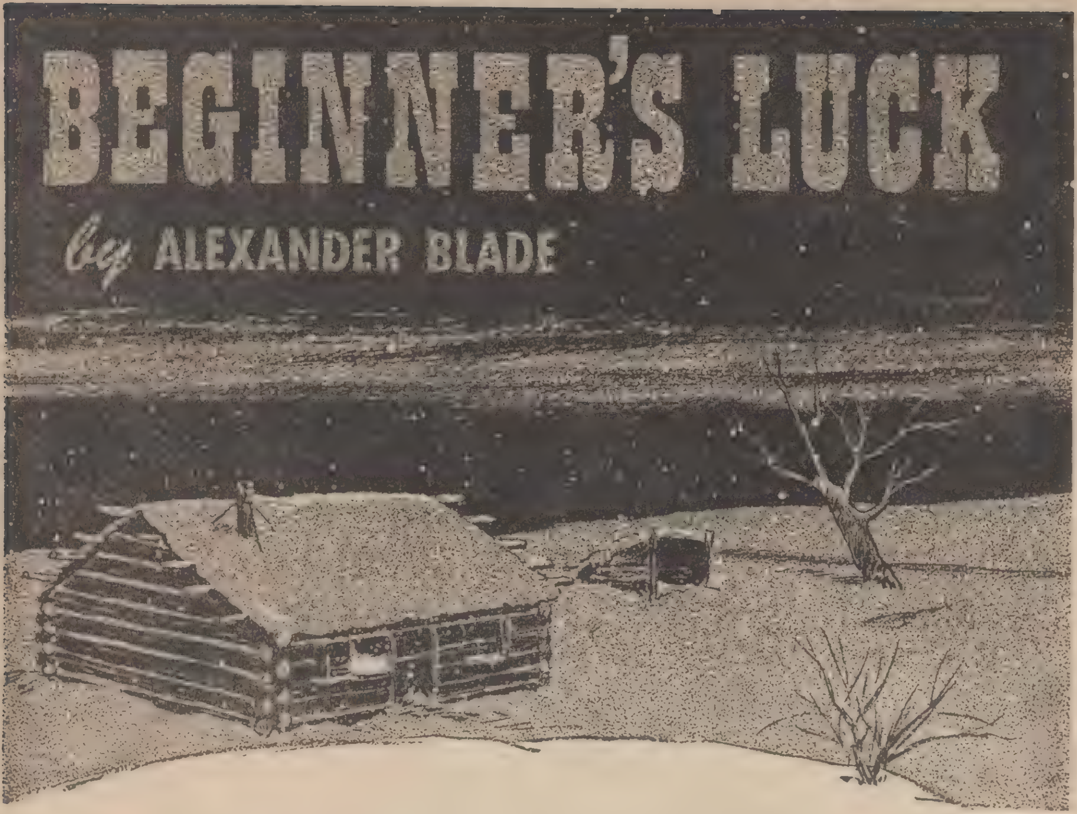
In the spring of 1811, another fur company led by Hunt started for the Rocky Mountain regions. As they were going up the Missouri, they saw a crude raft carrying three naked men coming toward them. It was the fearless Hoback, Rezner, and Robinson. It seems that they had been trapping on their own and had their horses loaded with furs when they were again attacked by the Blackfeet who robbed them of all that they owned, including their clothes. Hunt gave them food and clothes and asked them if they would like to guide him and his men over the Rockies. The intrepid three were glad to accept. They went overland to Henry's Fork where they rested for a time and tried to decide where to go from there. The Snake river was quite peaceful at that point, so they decided to build a fleet of canoes and go down the Snake and Columbia to the ocean. They left their horses in the care of the Shoshones. Hoback, Rezner, and Robinson didn't go along. They outfitted themselves and started on another hunting and trapping venture. Hunt and his men soon found that the Snake river became a foaming torrent. The men had to struggle to get to shore before they were caught in the rapids. When they finally got back to Henry's Fork, they found that the Indians had disappeared with all their horses. There was nothing left for them to do but to start the long trip back across the mountains on foot. They suffered starvation and thirst before they reached their goal at the mouth of the Columbia.

In the meantime our intrepid hunters were gathering their furs again. They had their packhorses loaded and were hopeful of getting their goods to St. Louis. But in the South Pass region, they were pounced upon by a wandering band of Arapahoes who took all their furs, ammunition, horses, and clothes. Then they turned the naked men loose in the wilds. Even though they had been faced with this situation twice before, it took a great deal of endurance for them to subsist on roots, berries, and small game till they met part of Hunt's returning men. Again the three men were clothed and supplied with equipment from the caches left by Hunt on his outgoing trip. They were still determined to take a load of furs into St. Louis, so they started out on another venture into the dangerous fur-bearing country.

One lasting service these fur hunters had performed during their westward and eastward journeys was to trace a historic highway which became known as the Oregon Trail, a trail over which our American civilization was carried from "sea to shining sea."

BEGINNER'S LUCK

by ALEXANDER BLADE



They say a man's luck is bound to run out someday—but Luke Landry was a tough hombre who knew only one thing—his was just starting!

LUKE LANDRY rode slowly through the thickening blanket of snow. His lean lanky figure slouched in the saddle and his body accommodated itself to the jerky motions of the horse as though he was a part of the animal. Which he was.

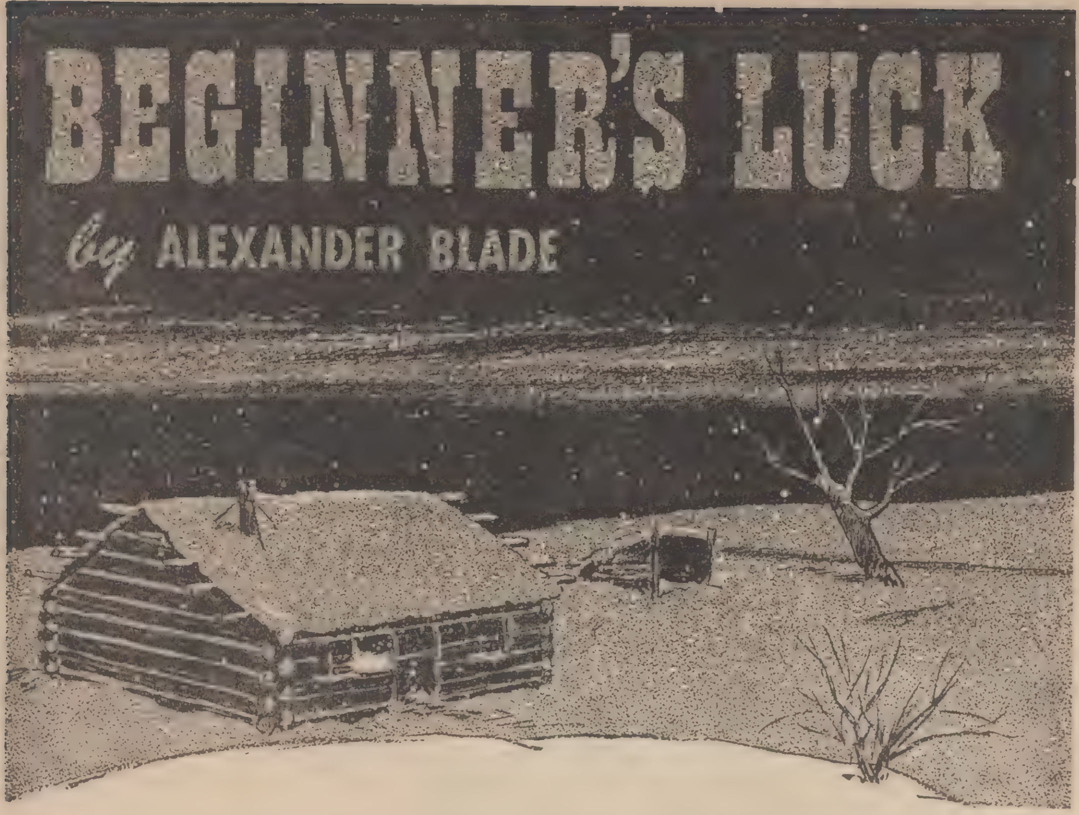
He rode slowly, not trying to force the horse's head. It was slippery underfoot and the animal adapted himself to the conditions. An icy Montana wind was beginning to rise and in spite of the hard going, Luke was aware that the animal was shivering.

He bent down, stroking Monday's neck.

"It's all right, boy," he crooned into the horse's ear. "We'll be home soon and you'll be bedded down and warm. I'm hungry and cold myself."

Seeming to understand, Monday managed to increase his gait without sliding all over the now-hidden trail.

I'm a liar, Luke thought. I'm lying in my teeth when I say I'm cold and hungry. I know what's really on my mind. He bent down to the horse's ear again, the icy butt of his carbine Winchester in its saddle boot tickling his side through the heavy sheepskin



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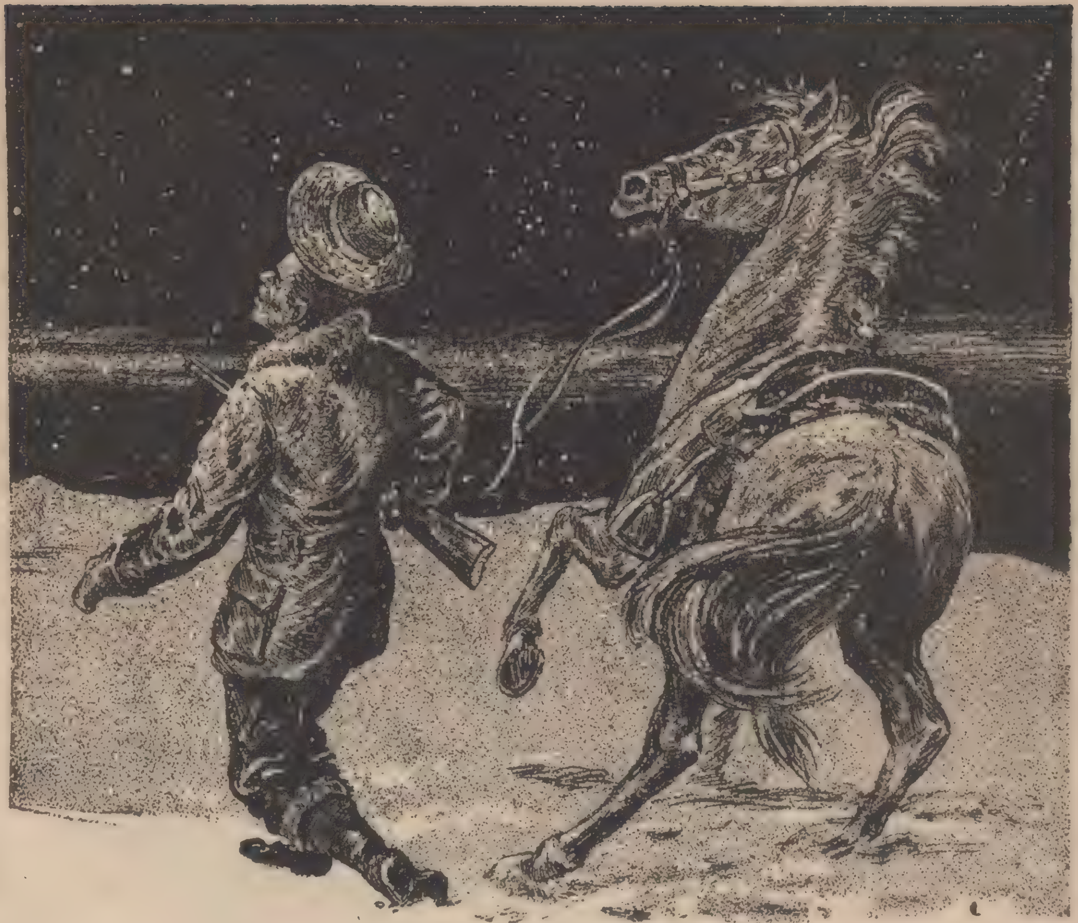

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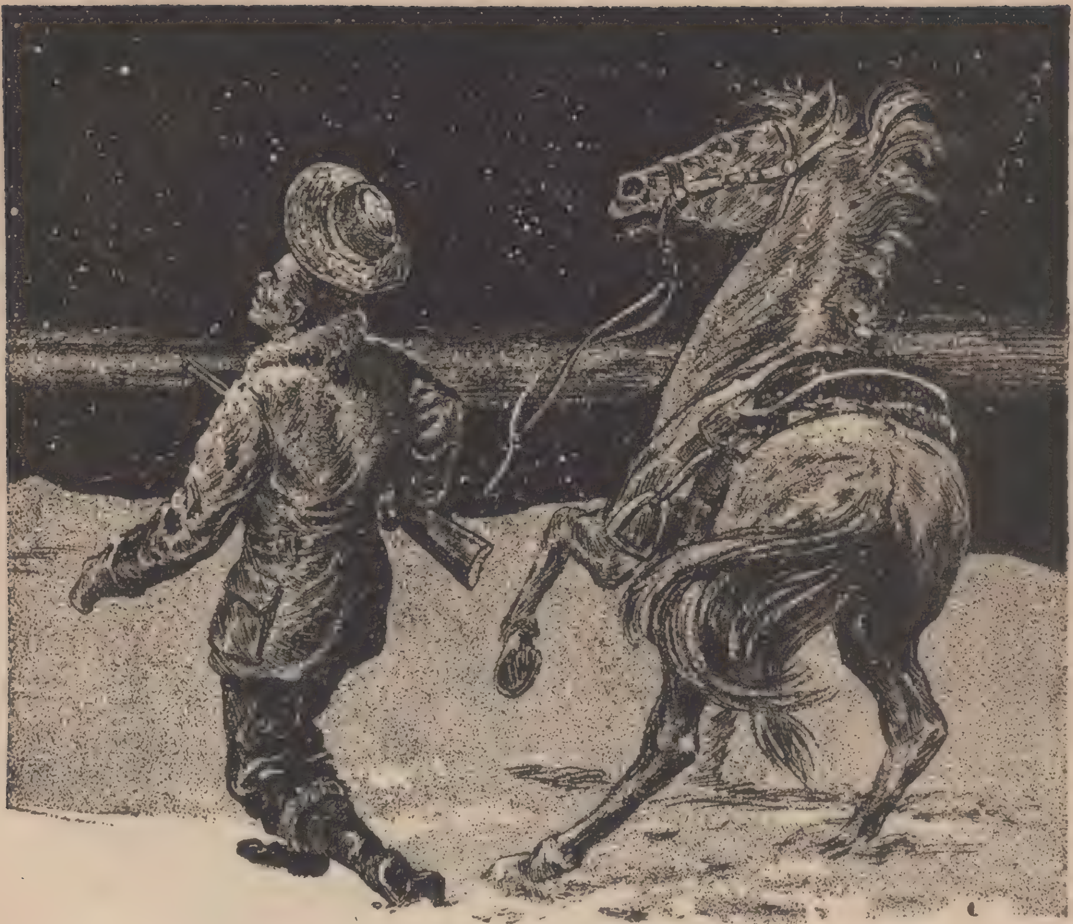
"You'll be there soon, Monday. Don't worry. We only got a couple of more miles to go."

Even then Luke's mind wasn't on Monday. It was far away. Luke could see himself sitting on the veranda of a ranch house. A half dozen cowpunchers sat in the saddle in front of him and he was giving them orders. "Olson," he was saying, "you take the far seven with three men. There's two hundred head near the arroyo."

It was nice to dream, Luke thought again. Chris'll marry me now and her pa won't say a word when I buy that acreage from Jake. It's damn good grazing land and I'll really get a start.

The wind increased a little in intensity and, in spite of himself, Luke snuggled further into his sheepskin. His ears were under the Stetson, but the bottoms felt like ice. But he was almost oblivious of anything outside of him. Even Monday, whom he loved like a brother, wasn't really bothering him. His mind was in the little log cabin two miles up the trail. Tucked in a chink in the wall was the grand gift that would make all his dreams possible. Neatly wrapped in oilskin and tied with a leather thong was a little bundle. There are lots of little bundles but this one was special. It



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It was all tied up in that little bundle. In that crinkly little package were ten thousand dollars in the form of crisp clean ten dollar bills!

They were all Luke's and he had come by them honestly—as honestly as anybody can come by money in a poker game.

Through the rising wind, Luke saw in his mind's eye, oblivious to everything else around him, the scene that had changed his life. It wasn't much of a scene at that, and it happened so fast that Luke didn't really believe it at the time. It happened three nights ago.

Luke had just dragged his beaten weary self in from a hard time with two hundred head of cattle for Johnson of the Bar Seven. It was a cold night and while Luke wasn't a drinking man, he knew a shot was just what he needed to give him the pick-up to get into his cabin from the town six miles away. He could have stayed in Copperhead overnight but he hadn't been home for a while and the little place would look good to him.

So he tied up before the Paradise and went in. There was the usual swirl of activity and the raucous music and shouting that for once he welcomed after the long and silent day.

He picked up a drink at the bar and sat down at one of the tables, ignoring the invitations from the girls who wanted company. He noticed that a poker game was going on at the table next to him.

A drink cleared his head and he took more interest in the game. He got up and watched a hand being played. Some of the men knew him and said hello. He fought down the impulse to spend the three hundred dollars in his pocket. Luke wasn't the gambling type even though he liked a friendly game. And this looked far from friendly. There was too much money on the table.

As Luke watched, two men dropped out of the game. There were still four at the table, a couple of them men he knew. The stranger in the game looked up and saw Luke watching.

"Sit in, cowboy," he invited cordially, "and build up that pay-money."

"Naw," Luke said, "I ain't playing today." He sized up the stranger carefully. From the size of the pile in front of the man, he was far ahead of the rest. He had the sharp look of the gambler but otherwise was undistinguished and his playing was straight. Luke knew enough about the game to tell that.

"All right," the man said, picking up his cigar, "it's your business. Can't say as I blame you for not wanting to get in such a rough game." He gestured at his pile casually.

FOR a moment the sight of the money and what it could mean swept weird thoughts through Luke's head.

To his own surprise, words formed on his lips.

"It ain't that rough," he said shortly and sat down in one of the vacant chairs.

"Good, that's the way to talk," the stranger said. "My name's Harris."

Quick introductions and then they started playing. Luke was in a crowd over his head and so he played cautiously. Almost before he realized what was happening, the hundred dollars worth of chips he had bought were mounting. In the heat and excitement of the game he wasn't aware of anything but the colored pasteboards before him. For half an hour the game went on. The three men who had been in it at the start, dropped out—cleaned between Luke and Harris.

The stakes rose. The stranger's face became flushed. His pile dwindled rapidly. Suddenly he stood up. A dry, embarrassed laugh came from his mouth.

"You've done it, sonny," he said. "I'm cleaned too. You've got it all." Abruptly he turned toward the bar and left Luke sitting with a completely dazed look on his face, almost paralyzed.

When he came to and received the congratulations of the gang of watchers around him, he cashed in the chips and headed for home with the bundle, intending to put it in the bank on the morrow.

Instead he wrapped it in oilskins and put it away in the cabin wall. At the time he was too interested in talking with Jake. He had made arrangements with Jake for buying the land and as soon as Tolby, the town lawyer, could draw up the necessary papers, he and Jake would make it legal.

When he left Jake's Luke went over to Chris's. The news had spread even there by now. While Chris was her usual self as any girl in love, her father showed a cordiality that had been lacking. That's what made Luke so happy. Mr. Denton had practically forbidden Chris to marry Luke ever. Luke could almost hear the words "wandering cowhand" that Mr. Denton had used before the two of them and they hurt. But not any longer. And when Luke made it clear that he was buying Jake's land, the atmosphere was completely clear. And Luke didn't feel too badly about it. He realized that Mr. Denton loved his daughter and didn't want to see her tie up with some shiftless cowhand.

In his mind, Luke boasted to himself. I ain't shiftless and I got property, he thought. My luck has changed.

A particularly bitter blast of icy northern wind brought Luke back into the present. Monday quivered beneath him and tried to quicken his pace. It wasn't long before the bend in the trail. In the absolute darkness, Monday's trembling legs followed the now obliterated path by instinct.

Luke slapped his freezing hands together. Suddenly the lump of rock that marked the bend loomed up before him. It looked like a white ghost—but a welcome one—and Luke could feel Monday's recognition of home.

Then they were around it and Luke saw his little cabin. He stiffened in the saddle. Something was wrong!

Tethered in front of the half-opened door was a horse, his markings completely indistinguishable in the poor visibility. But there was a light in the cabin. Luke could see the gleam of the kerosene lantern faintly through the snow-decked window.

He brought Monday to an abrupt halt and his sudden jerking on the reins caused the horse to let out a loud whinny, a cry of frustration at stopping so close to home. Luke slid the Winchester carbine from the saddle boot and levered a cartridge home. He didn't imagine anyone knew how much money was in the cabin but he wasn't going to take any chances. Leaving Monday standing in his tracks, Luke swung from the saddle and started walking toward the half open door.

Suddenly he heard the tinkle of glass. His eye spotted something poking through the little window. Alarmed, Luke brought up his carbine. Before he could do anything there was a sharp crack, a flash of flame and Luke felt as if he had been kicked in the chest by a mule. He made one gallant effort to stay erect and bring up the carbine. He heard Monday whinny again behind him—then everything went black and he pitched forward in the snow. Only one desperate word went through his mind—"bushwhacked."

* * *

IT SEEMED like an eternity when his senses returned. Luke felt like a bundle of ice. There was no sense or feeling left to him. He was not in pain. There was something funny in his face. Then he realized where he was and what had happened. He was lying flat on his face in the snow, sprawled out, his unused carbine at his side. Standing over him was Monday. He could feel the warm breath of the horse on the back of his neck and the animal's rough tongue caressed his cheek.

Luke dragged himself to a sitting position, his mind a kaleidoscope of confused thought.

He reached up for the stirrup at Monday's side. Clinging firmly to it with his numbed right hand, he dragged himself to his feet. His left arm hung down at his side, completely numbed and useless.

By the dint of extreme concentration he managed to walk Monday to the little barn behind the cabin. He slowly and painfully swung open the door and prodded the horse in. There was fodder in a bin at the side. Monday was taken care of. Then and then only did Luke go back to the cabin.

The lantern was still lit when he walked through the open door. He turned around and closed it. Half fainting and yet half alert in a peculiar way, Luke managed to throw a little fire together. In the course of dragging some wood from the fire-box to the fireplace, he inspected the chink where he had put the money. It was only a confirmation. He knew in his heart it was gone.

The cabin was in a wild state of disarray, with things tossed everywhere, but the hiding place had not been very difficult to find. Whoever had taken the money had reasoned well.

Luke put on a kettle of water and then examined himself. With the numbness of the cold going from him, pain began to sweep over him, but not intolerably so. When he took off his sheepskin and his coat and his shirt, he could see that they were blood-soaked. The bullet had caught him in the fleshy part of the upper arm. Fortunately it had passed clean through and there was no necessity to probe for a bullet.

Working as calmly as he could in spite of the pain, Luke bathed the wound, and wrapped it around with a crude bandage. Then he quickly managed to gather some grub together. The work, mingled with the great effort, took his mind off the numbing pain; in addition it gave him a chance to think clearly.

Somebody who knew he had won the money had also learned that he had not deposited it in the bank. Then very simply he had come out to Luke's cabin, to his surprise and joy found it empty and the money practically at his fingertips. What a fool he had been, thought Luke.

The question was, who had done it? Luke had never had any trouble with anybody in town. Harris, the gambler, hadn't acted suspicious or angry when he dropped all his winnings to what he must have considered a raw kid. Yet, who would benefit more than Harris from such an out-and-out robbing. The more Luke thought about it, the more likely it seemed. He had been so excited the night he won the money, that he hadn't been more than casually aware of the gambler's attitude.

The first intense pain of the wound was gone and now only its throbbing reminded him that he had just been shot. He walked to the door. The snow had stopped and the night was cold and clear. This was good, Luke thought. The bushwhacker would leave a trail. And Luke was determined to follow it to the ends of the earth if necessary. Too much hinged on that wad of money. Luke's whole future was wrapped in it. His girl, his land, his security.

Moving comparatively slowly so as not to start the wound bleeding afresh, Luke squeezed back into his coat and sheepskin, after changing to dry socks. He took his six-gun from the drawer and strapped it on. It was a cinch that he wasn't going to use a rifle for some time to come.

He went back to the barn after locking the cabin door. Monday rubbed against him when he stepped in.

He patted the horse on the neck. Monday whinnied.

"I hate to do it, boy," Luke murmured, "it's rough on you but we got to go places. I'll make it up to you."

IT WAS hard work mounting so awkwardly and in such a gingerly manner. But he had to favor that shoulder. It was a good thing he hadn't unsaddled Monday or he'd never have gotten the saddle on again. Luke had lost enough blood to feel it. His head was a little light and in spite of the cold he felt feverish.

Scanning the trail it was easy to see that the stranger had taken off in a hurry. The snow marked his path clearly. He had taken the trail up which Luke had come and his tracks were distinguishable from Luke's not only by direction but also by the greater depth.

Luke spurred Monday on. At no time did the trail branch out. It was straight back toward town. As Luke neared the town, the trail became completely obscured, mixed and mingled to invisibility with dozens of other tracks. Luke could see that there were still plenty of lights on and that as always a good portion of the town was awake.

The first thing Luke did when he hit town was to take Monday to the stable. He had him bedded down after being fed. Luke was above all a good cowpuncher and his horse meant more to him than anything.

Next he headed for Doc Reebee's. The old man heard his story and looked at the wound.

"You done a good job, son," the old vet said. He rebandaged it for safety's sake but there was nothing else to do but let nature take its course.

"Is Granger's office open?" Luke asked him.

"Maybe the sheriff's attending to some business. The office was open a half hour ago. Go down and see and good luck!" The old man turned back to the newspaper he had abandoned when Luke came in.

There was a light in Sheriff Granger's office. Usually it was open because there always was a steady quota of drunks that had to be locked up for the night to sleep it off. Luke knocked and a hearty voice boomed:

"Come in!"

Luke stepped in and the good natured heavy-set sheriff looked surprised at Luke's left arm dangling underneath his sheepskin from a hastily improvised sling.

"What in hell's bells happened to you, Luke?" the sheriff asked sympathetically. "You get in a shootin' fracas?"

Luke told his story to Granger quickly and excitedly. He also made clear his suspicion. The sheriff listened intently.

"Well, Luke," he said slowly, "we gotta take it easy. You can't go around arrestin' everybody on suspicion. I don't care much for Harris 'cause he's a professional gambler, but he's played in nothing but honest games. You know that."

"I know it," Luke said, "but don't forget that he didn't feel too good when he dropped that load to me."

"I know it, son," the sheriff replied patiently, "I'll look around and do some questioning, but it'll take time.

Luke looked downcast. He thumped the table with his good right hand.

"But can't you see," he protested, "if you take it too easy, Harris'll get a chance to skip town in a hurry."

"When he leaves town, he'll be cleared—or he won't leave. I'll keep an eye on him." Granger got up. "Now you get some sleep and take it easy with that arm, Luke. I'll get your money back, if Harris has it—which I don't think he has. Frankly, Luke, I'll bet some down and outer heard you talkin' or maybe he seen the game —and then he tracked you down and bushwhacked you. Boy, you don't realize who the real criminals are. Well, I'll try and get your money back anyhow, son, no matter who's got it. Don't worry. Now do as I say."

"All right, sheriff, you're the law," Luke said as he got up to go, but his words didn't ring with conviction.

Luke left the sheriff's office dissatisfied. He had a feeling in his bones that it was Harris. If the sheriff don't do something fast, he thought, I will.

LUKE ambled over to the saloon. As usual it was going full blast. Several people who knew him commented on his arm. He brushed their inquiries aside with a vague "hurt in a fall—Monday was wild the other night."

He had a quick drink while he scanned the bar and the gambling portion of the saloon. A number of games were going on. And at one table Harris was playing steadily. He made no comment nor did he act as if he'd even seen Luke. Luke strolled over to the table.

"Oh hello, Luke," the gambler said as Luke approached the table. "Care to sit in on the game?" he invited cordially. His smooth bland face betrayed no fear or surprise, nor did Luke even detect a flicker of hesitation.

"I've got my winnings," Luke said, "I don't want to take another chance with them."

"Can't say as I blame you, Luke. You sure cleaned me, the other night. Hurt your arm?" he asked abruptly.

"Yeah," Luke answered. "Fell from my horse when he stumbled."

"Too bad." The gambler turned back to the game and said no more to the observing cowboy. Luke watched him closely looking for some sign of guilt but there was none. Yet he would have sworn that this was the man who had ambushed him and robbed the cabin.

Luke watched the game for half an hour. Harris won steadily. Luke wanted to yell at him.

Finally he commented quietly:

"I didn't clean you so bad the other night, eh Harris? You sure restaked yourself in a hurry."

For an instant Luke thought he saw a gleam of anger in the other's eyes, but it was masked instantly and Harris calmly replied:

"A man who takes a chance has to have a little nest egg—just in case."

Luke didn't say anymore and he left the players to themselves. Now he was more sure than ever that Harris was the one. Instead of leaving town and casting suspicion immediately himself, Harris was wisely acting as if nothing happened. And the hell of it was, Luke couldn't do a thing about it.

Luke went back to the bar. He had another drink while he thought about the matter. His mind raced like a trip hammer, constantly seeking a point of attack on Harris's armor. Finally it came to him. Supposing he searched Harris's room at the hotel. While it wasn't likely that Harris would have left the money there, there might be some clue to the fact that he had been in Luke's cabin not long before.

Suiting the action to the thought, Luke left the bar and meandered over to the small hotel. It was a down-at-the-heels insignificant little building with only a few dozen rooms in its frame case.

Luke strolled up to the desk. The sleepy clerk greeted him with a nod.

"Stayin' in town tonight, Luke?" he asked. Luke nodded in return.

"Give me a room, Charlie, it's too cold to ride back to my cabin tonight."

"Say," the other remarked as Luke signed the register, "I hear you cleaned Harris the other night for ten thousand dollars. How does it feel to be a rich man?"

"It's a great feeling," Luke answered his eyes traveling rapidly over the register. He saw Harris marked for room 14.

"Give me the key, Charlie," he demanded, yawning, "I'm tired and this arm hurts." He went through the usual routine of explaining that he had fallen from his horse. The clerk guffawed incredulously.

"It ain't so," he said. "Who did you get in a fight with?"

Luke winked: "I ain't talkin'," he said.

Leaving Charlie laughing to himself, Luke went up the rickety stairway. As he passed room 14, he tried the door, but it was locked. Then he thought of something. He went back downstairs.

"Say, Charlie," he called to the clerk, "was Harris here all evening?"

Charlie looked up curiously. "Yeah," he answered. "He went over to the saloon a few hours ago."

"But was he in his room all the while before?" Luke persisted.

"Natcherly," Charlie said. "Why? What's up, Luke?"

"Oh, nothin'. I just wondered."

Leaving the mystified clerk to ponder over the questioning, Luke went back upstairs. He entered his own room and went to the window. He opened it half way and looked out, leaning on his right arm.

A narrow eave ran around the frame building above the first floor. It didn't slope much and it was about eight inches wide. An athletic man could walk it. Room fourteen was two rooms away from Luke's and the snow covered limbs of a large oak were only a few feet away. The picture was now clear. A bell rang in Luke's mind when he saw how simple it was.

HARRIS had undoubtedly left his room through the window and by way of the ledge and the tree. On an unpleasant night like this it was an easy matter for him to get out on the trail without being seen. The side of the hotel was masked by the smaller building to the side and front of it.

Two can play at this sort of game, Luke thought. Luke took off his sheepskin, hitched his six-gun to the rear of him where it would be out of the way. Then favoring his wounded arm as best he could, he stepped through the window onto the ledge. It was precarious. The slippery eave didn't make for good footing, especially when the snow was impacted by his weight. Regardless, he was determined to get into Harris's room. He could break down the door or get hold of the key without tipping off Charlie and Charlie wasn't one to keep his mouth shut, so Luke'd have to play it the hard way.

Slowly and carefully he worked his way along the projecting eave, clinging to the clapboard wall by wedging his fingertips in the gaps swollen in the boards by the action of the weather. Once he nearly slipped and the sweat ran from him. But inch by inch he made his way toward room 14.

There was no light in the intervening room so its occupant was either out or asleep. Luke finally reached his goal. The window was stiff as he tried to raise it. Fortunately there were no locks on the hotel windows or he never would have made it.

After forcing the window open an inch or so, Luke was able to use his gun barrel as a pry bar. The window slid up suddenly with a rasping sound and at the same time, he almost lost his balance.

It was the work of but a minute to swing himself into the room; Luke sat down on the floor breathing heavily. He was sweating profusely, his arm ached terribly, a series of chills ran all over him and he felt as if he was going to pass out. Mentally taking a grip on himself, he forced his beating heart to quiet. Then he started looking around.

His eyes had become accustomed to the jet blackness of the room and he could make out the outlines of the simple furniture.

Using matches he explored the room. Much of Harris' clothing was scattered around the room. Near the stove a pair of low heeled boots were drying. He was out somewhere long enough to soak his boots, Luke thought.

There was a funny odor in the air and Luke didn't recognize it immediately. Then it came to him with a start. It was gun oil!

He looked carefully around the room. Standing in one corner was a gun. It was a Winchester Carbine just like Luke's and very common in these parts. The odd thing about it to Luke's mind was the fact that it had just been cleaned shortly before.

The barrel was slick and shiny and there was no evidence of it having been fired this evening other than the fact that it had been cleaned. And why would a gun be cleaned unless it had been fired. Especially a gun belonging to Harris, a man who certainly would have little use for a carbine?

Everything fitted in nicely, Luke thought. Now if he could find the money, the tale would be complete.

He went through the room like wildfire. He spared nothing. He ripped into the mattress, examined every crack and crevice that he could think of. He went through all of Harris's personal belongings, but there wasn't the trace of a dollar bill, much less the pack of tens. Undoubtedly Harris had the money on him. He wouldn't take any such chances as had Luke. And it took a lot of good fortune to get a man searched. Oh, Harris was a wise one.

Cursing under his breath as much from the frustration of not finding the money as from the pain of his arm, Luke finally abandoned the search. Instead he sat in the middle of the floor and tried to figure out what he'd do when Harris came back.

BUT the toll of the day's events was beginning to be felt. Unaware of what was happening, a lethargy and drowsiness started to come over Luke. He felt as if he were floating on clouds, as if his head was spinning. In a detached way he knew this mustn't happen. He must bring himself awake. Then things spun completely, he felt something warm running down his arm. And all became black.

He was out only a few minutes. Gradually he came to his senses. He was almost but not quite aware of a click. He vaguely thought he heard something. His right hand clawed for his gun slowly. Before he could move, he felt the floor vibrate as the door was suddenly thrown open.

Harris stood in the doorway, a candle in his left hand, a vicious little Derringer in his right hand. He stepped through the doorway quickly, instantly spotting Luke on the floor. His foot moved with agonizing speed and he stepped on Luke's right hand. Luke winced with the pain but he could do nothing. Harris drew Luke's gun and threw it in the corner. Then he lit the kerosene lamp and surveyed his visitor.

He sat down in a chair opposite Luke while the latter gazed at him dully. His face broke into an evil grin.

"Luke, my boy," he said, "I'm surprised at you. You're not very smart you know. Don't you think I'd know that you'd try and get in here?"

Desperately Luke tried to think. He must keep alert and awake. He must ignore the faintness and the pain. He looked up at Harris.

"I knew it was you," he said. "I knew it the minute I saw you in the saloon."

Harris laughed. "Of course," he said. "Who else would you expect? But does anybody else think the same way?"

Luke said nothing. He was trapped and he knew it.

Harris said calmly: "I'm going to kill you, Luke. I'm going to shoot you where you sit. And the explanation will be so nice and easy. You broke into my room intent on robbery—maybe murder—there'll be a smoking gun in your hand. And you'll be nice and dead." He patted his waist. "And the ten thousand will still be with me. I never expected this good fortune, Luke. You've been very kind to me."

Luke tried to shut the mocking words out of his mind but they boomed in his ears. "I'm going to kill you, Luke . . . I'm going to kill you, Luke . . ."

Luke made very effort to bring himself around and strangely enough the tension was doing it. He could no longer feel any pain in his arm. He was completely alert and aware of everything that was happening. There was no question in his mind. He knew that unless he acted—and quickly—he was going to be a dead man—and a criminal at that. Even the wishy-washy sheriff would go along with Harris's story. Luke was a good boy, Luke could imagine the sheriff saying, but he got some funny ideas.

Harris toyed with the Derringer.

"How do you want it, Luke?" he asked as if he were about to do Luke a favor. "Do you want it nice and easy in the head?" He laughed, delighted with himself for making such a game of this. He felt the god-like surge of power that wielding a gun over a completely helpless individual gives. He was the master here.

Luke could see his trigger finger clenching and unclenching about the butt of the Derringer. It was now or never!

Gathering every muscle into a tight knot, Luke sprang like a suddenly released spring. The Derringer went off with a roar. A sledge-hammer blow caught him in the same arm that had been hit before. Before Harris could fire the second barrel, Luke was on him like an unchained tiger. Luke's hands grabbed the Derringer barrel and forced the gun backward. Harris was struggling madly to tear the gun away. There was fear and terror in his eyes. Luke was a madman.

Grimly Luke forced the gun toward Harris. Desperately Harris struggled to free himself. There was a sudden roar and Harris wilted. A small burnt round hole appeared magically in his coat above the heart and he dropped back.

Sobbing wildly Luke fell on him, his fingers fumbling and tearing as he ripped the money belt away from the man's body.

Seconds later the door was flung open and the frightened Charlie stared in. In a minute a half-dozen others gathered. Luke grinned up from the floor weakly.

"Charlie," he called in a feeble voice, "call the sheriff and tell him it was Harris all right."

He gestured toward the money belt on the floor beside him. "Put this in the safe, will you Charlie? There's a lot of future wrapped up in it." And then for another time, he passed out, but this time he was smiling.

THE END

THE ROCK CREEK CROSSING

★ by Hilary Cowen ★

ROCK CREEK is in Nebraska along the Oregon Trail. It was a convenient way station during the pioneer days from the time Captain Sublette opened the wagon road to the Rockies in 1830. Kit Carson carved his name and date on a cliff near the crossing in 1842 and it can still be seen there today. All the colorful panorama of the building of the West passed before this rock, but today there is little left to remind us of the activities that once centered around this colorful spot and gave it its wild reputation.

It was here in 1861 that "Wild Bill" Hickok began his killing career by shooting down Dave McCandles and his two companions. McCandles came to Rock Creek in 1859. He was on his way to seek his fortune in the gold fields, but he met so many disappointed people on their way to their homes back East, that he thought up another scheme to get money. He bought the ranch which included Rock Crossing, and built a bridge across the stream and collected tolls from the many travelers going westward and eastward along the Oregon Trail at this point. Some said that he took in gold at the rate of one thousand dollars a month.

When the Overland stage line and the Pony Express was established, Rock Creek was made a way station. For a time McCandles remained as station-keeper. Hickok had the job of tending the horses of the station, and for some uncertain reason, a dislike grew up between the two men. Later, McCandles sold his holdings at Rock Creek Crossing to the promoters of the stage and the Pony Express, and moved to another ranch. Horace Wellman was made station-keeper and Hickok stayed on as stock-tender. Payment for the station was to be made to McCandles in installments, but when there was a little delay on the part of the company in meeting their obligations, troubles flared up. McCandles made several trips to the station to collect his money, and seemed to lay all the blame on Wellman. Or least he made the threat that if the money was not paid, he would take the station and all the stock back. A few days later he came to the door of the station accompanied by his son and two companions. Hickok believed that he had come to carry out his threat, so he fired at him from behind a curtain and shot him through the heart. When his friends stepped up to help McCandles, Hickok shot and killed them too.

Hickok was tried, and later acquitted. Then he enlisted as a scout in the Union Army. Later he became a two-gun sheriff in western Kansas and killed so many people that he became known as "Wild Bill." A few years later, he was shot in the back while he sat at a gambling table.

CHUCK-WAGON CHARLEY

★ by Pete Bogg ★

IT WAS the Seventies that started the vast cattle enterprises rolling. The country was recovering from the paralyzing blows to its economy by the War between the States. It was expanding and growing and industrializing and the markets of the East which still housed the bulk of the American people pouring their labor into industry, required food—food in vast quantities. Wheat, that basic staff of life, was wanted in vast quantities and the huge fields of the Mid-West answered that demand. But a people who are building a nation, sweating and toiling in front of furnaces, in the bowels of foundries and in the depths of factories producing the goods for a world, require meat.

The West was ideally suited to answer this need for a number of reasons. The buffalo were being killed off by the tens of millions. That left gigantic areas of grazing lands unused. Above all there were energetic and long-sighted men who knew that cattle-raising was a chance not only to provide their country with food but to make their personal fortunes. Without ado, bold and brave men took over vast tracts of land in Texas and the surrounding Territories, seized it and produced beef by the ton for the Eastern market. The railroads were beginning to thrust their steel tentacles westward, organizing focal points for towns and offering the transportation facilities for this western produce—meat on the hoof. But the country was so large that with all the rail construction the cattle from the southern and mid-Texan ranges had to be driven north to the railheads.

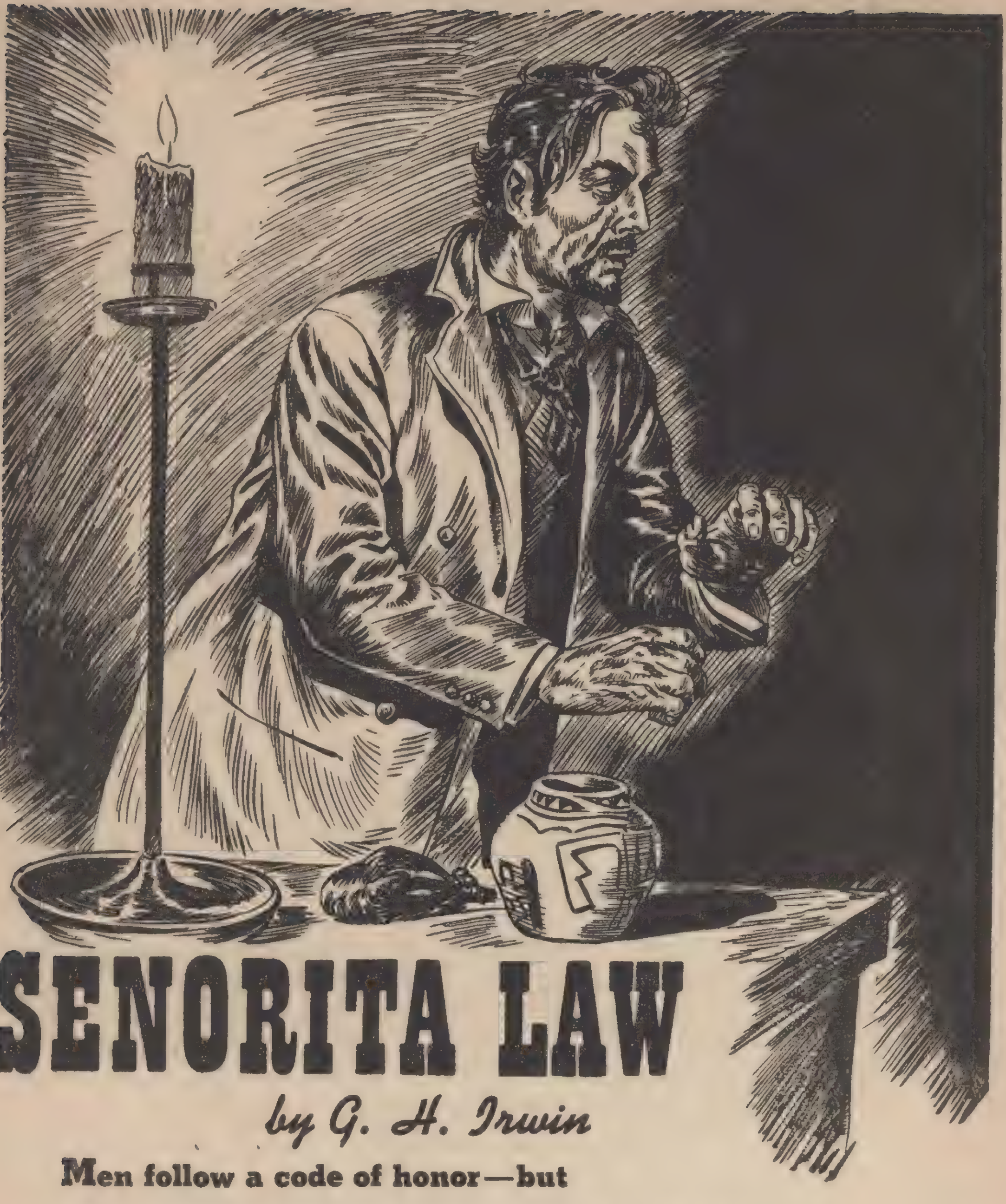
The hard-bitten cowboy came into origin as the laboring man of the West, secure in his dignity, fearless and hard-working. The bitter work of rounding up cattle who had spent the year fattening up was only a starter for these men. They had to drive the vast herds of cattle to the railheads often over hundreds of miles of rough ground and in all sorts of weather, ranging from uncomfortably torrid heat to biting cold winter.

And they had to be fed. The hero of any cowboy-crew making the long trail, was, in his way, the cook. This simple humble man, often an ex-cowboy himself, with usually the aid of only one assistant, worked like a beaver to cram the insatiable maws of the dozens of hard-working constantly hungry cowboys attached to his wagon. "Chuck-wagon Charley" was never a chef in the formal sense of the word. He couldn't make fancy pastries. He was no artist. But he could throw together a hunger-satisfying, belly-filling meal for two dozen men in no time flat, under any conditions.

AT FOUR in the morning when the cowboys were still wrapped in their blankets, Chuck-wagon Charley was working like a beaver to get a mountainous breakfast ready for his hungry crew. He was the mainstay of the herding gang. A good cook could make an outfit—a bad one could ruin it.

In those days, the Government cavalry still hadn't knocked out the Indians completely and the cook had to be able to fire a Sharpe with the best of them. Nesters were taking over large portions of the ranges and range war often involved every man in an outfit. Chuck-wagon Charley was there too!

This humble worker, killing himself for a mere thirty a month, deserves all the praise that has been heaped on his so-called betters. The saga of One-Eye Cal Barren, chuck rustler and grub-bundler for a small outfit on the lower Panhandle, is often recounted in histories of the early West. Returning from Arroyo To, a small railroad in northern Texas, now long-gone, he, his "boy" and his wagon were ambushed by eleven whiskey-saturated Sioux. His helper was killed, the wagon teams were slaughtered, and he almost died. But for eleven hours he stood off that howling crew of savages, until help came, and when the doc bandaged his new-lost eye, he (in spite of the pain) looked up, took another pull on the bottle, spat on the ground and asked for more Indians. Actually he had killed three, but he was privileged to name his number. Men like that made the West, and not only cowboys, rangers, sheriffs and Indian fighters were the ones—Give Chuck-wagon Charley his due!

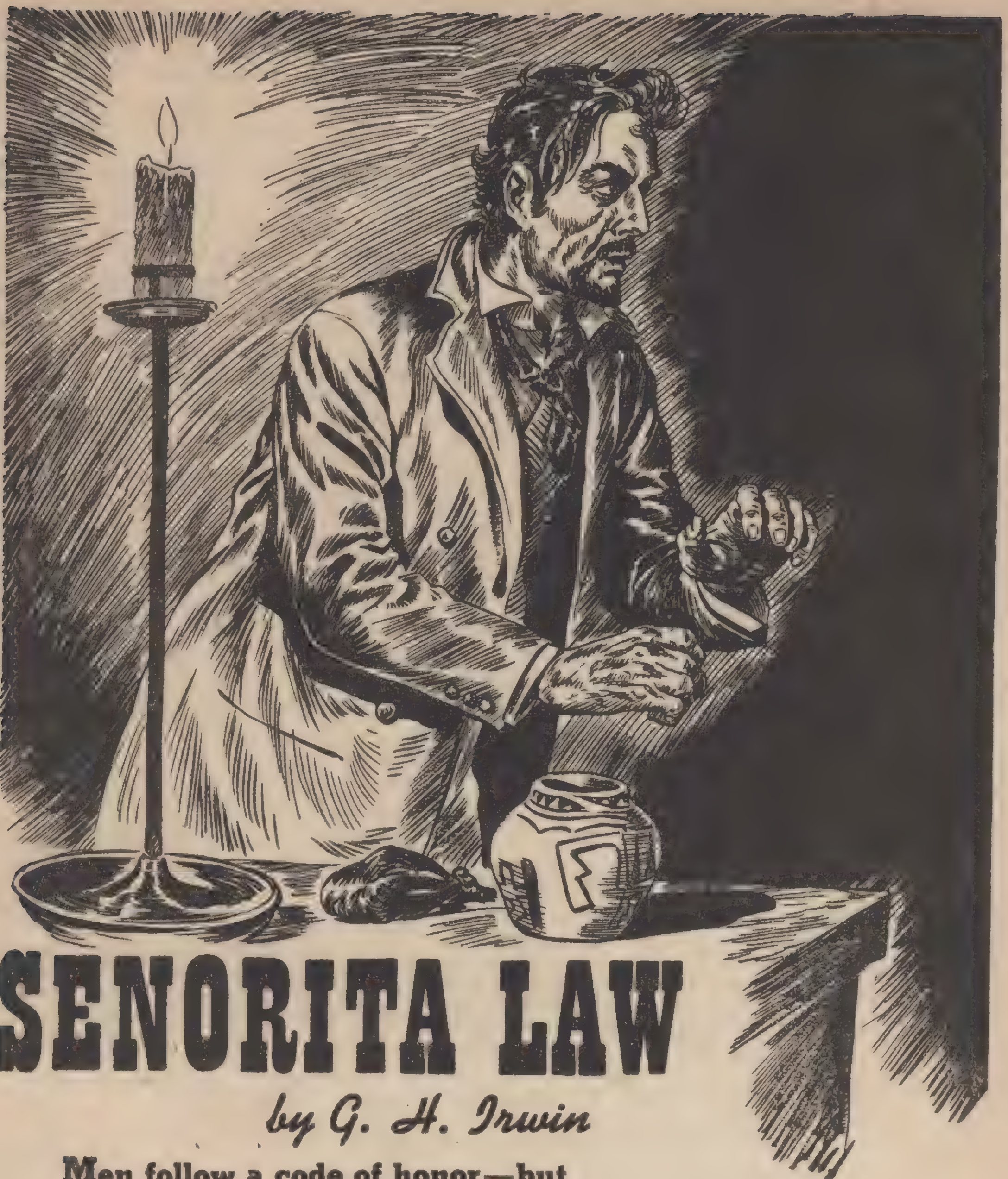


SENORITA LAW

by G. H. Irwin

Men follow a code of honor—but a *Senorita* obeys only one law—her own . . .

LIEUTENANT WARD SLOANE eased his aching back against the rough seat cushions of the jolting stage. The coach was small and even the fact that he was the only passenger didn't give him much room to stretch his healthy six feet. Ward groaned as the stage hit a particularly deep rut. If my orders hadn't called for travelling by stage, he thought to himself, I'd have bought a horse. It would have been much easier.



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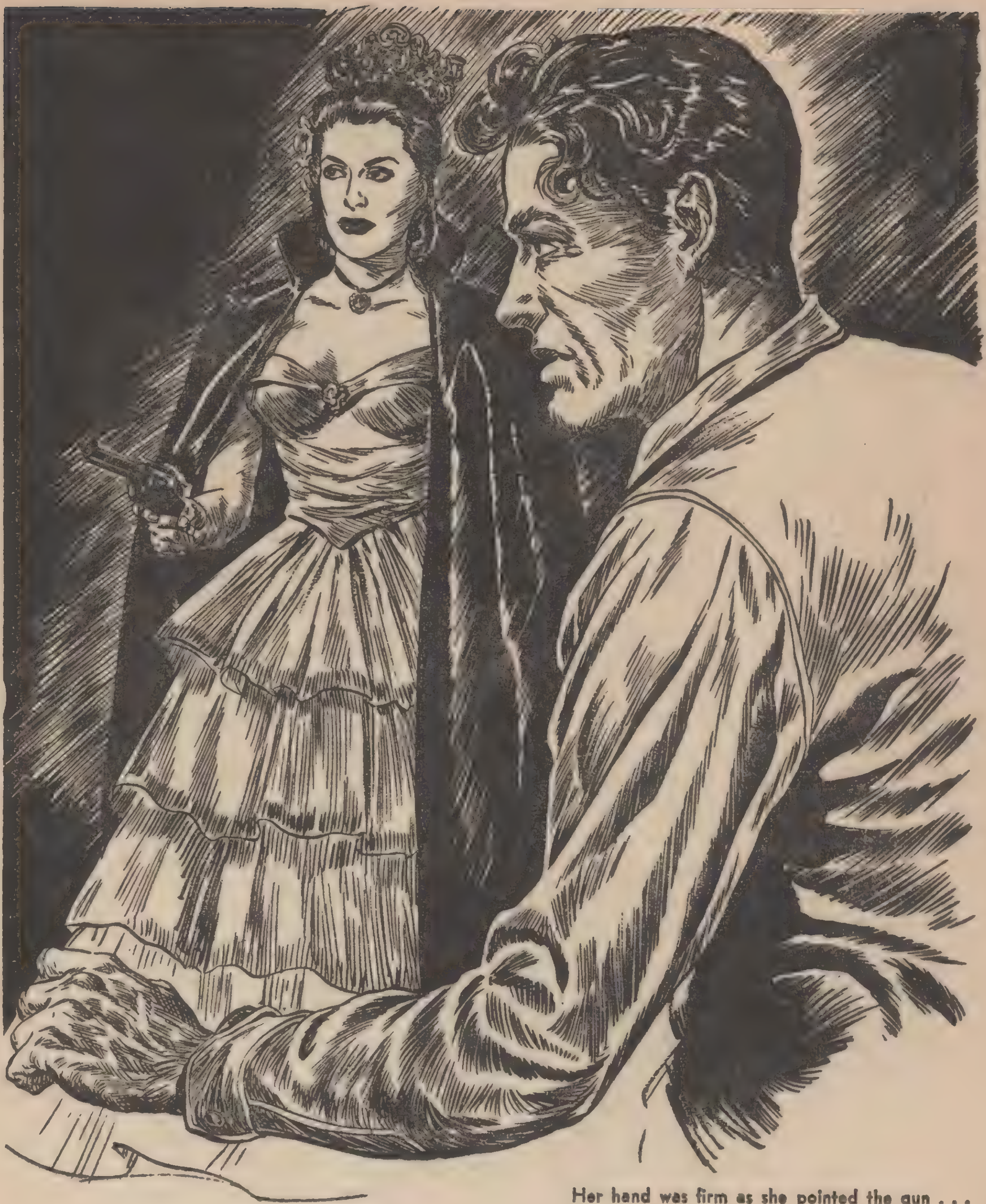
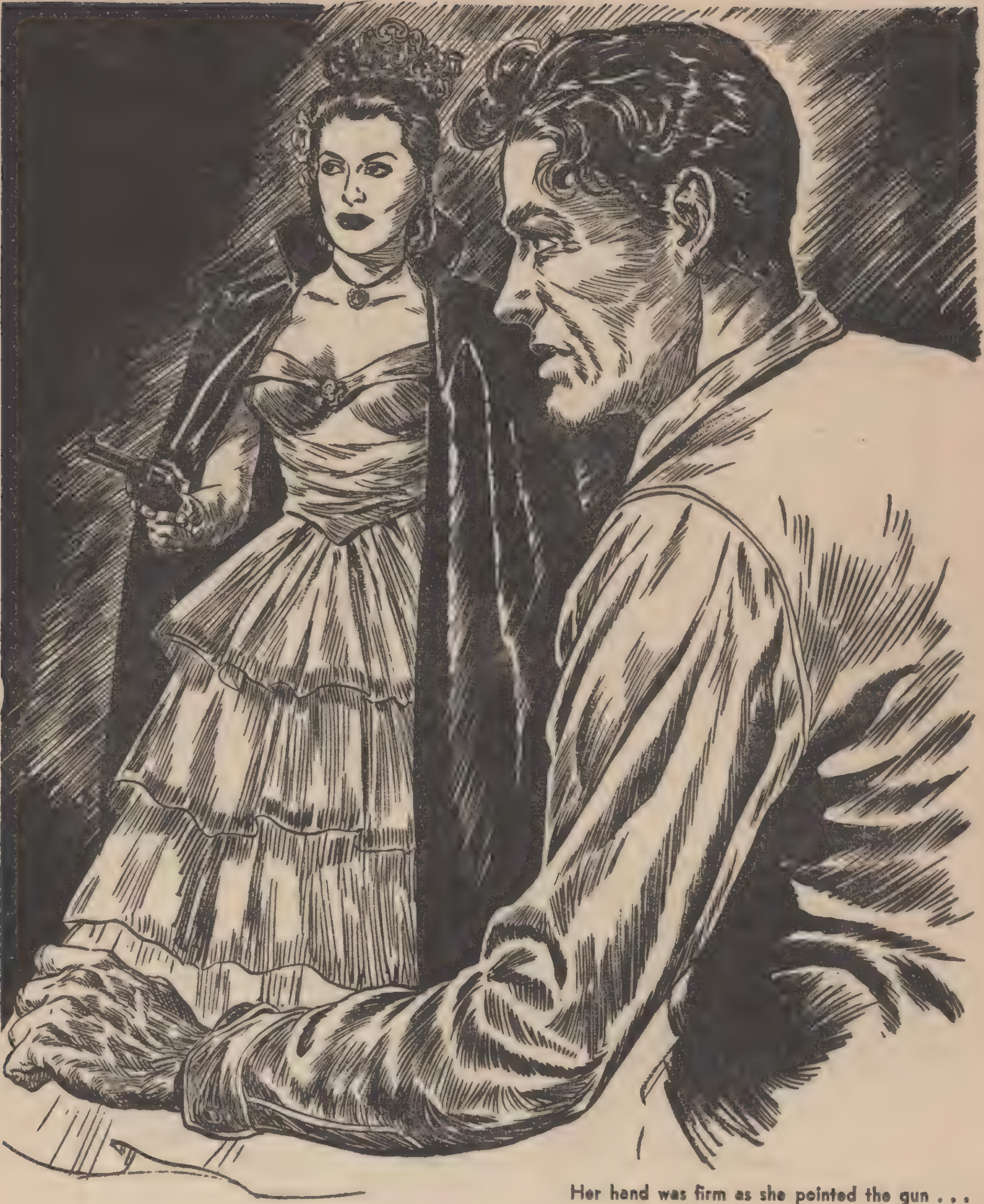


Her hand was firm as she pointed the gun . . .

His handsome face twisted in a wry grin. You asked for it, he said mentally. What did you expect when you joined the Army? Here you are, a brand new second lieutenant, fresh out of West Point, and your first assignment is some Godforsaken post in Southern California where you'll probably rot. Why didn't they send you to Fort Laramie as you requested? You'd have at least gotten some action against the Pawnee. God knows what you'll do at



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San Ruyez. It's probably a sleepy little border town where you'll spend nine-tenths of your time making inspections of tired weary men who don't give a damn whether you inspect them or not. And Washington'll probably forget all about you.

Ward lit a small cigar. A deep drag on it refreshed him. The bouncing of the stage seemed less important. He reached into a side pocket of his tunic and fished out the copy of his orders. His eyes scanned the finely penned strokes.

". . . You will report to Captain David Winslow, commanding the garrison at San Ruyez at 2000 on August 11th, 1889. Signed: Joseph Atweiler, Colonel Commanding, Fort Leslie, California."

Atweiler had told him nothing of his assignment. And very few people he had talked to knew anything about San Ruyez except that it was near the new gold field that had been discovered recently. Why worry about it? It was the Army and Ward would take it.

He glanced out the window. The sun was beginning to go down. Ward pulled out his heavy gold watch that had belonged to his father. It read eight-thirty. Already he was a half hour late.

"Hey, driver!" Ward leaned out the open window and called to one of the two men in front. "When will we make San Ruyez?"

Over the racket of the bouncing coach, Ward caught the answer. " 'Nother half hour, Lieutenant."

Well, Ward thought, that was a nice way to begin. Report on your first assignment to duty, an hour late. Wonder what Captain Winslow would say?

In spite of his preoccupation with this simple little problem, Ward couldn't help but be aware of the beauty of the countryside. Heavily forested and lush, this was a far cry and a better one in many respects than, say, Fort Laramie with its dust and desert dryness. See Ward, he told himself, you're always too ready to complain. Maybe you'll like San Ruyez. You'll be in the army a long time so you might as well learn to be philosophical about it.

Ward leaned back once more, meditatively sucking on the cigar and musing over his coming assignment. Through the dusk he could spot an occasional cabin or barn or farm building. Evidently they were pretty close to San Ruyez.

The stage topped a rise, the peak of a hill that was free from vegetation and Ward caught a glimpse of the town ahead. He was surprised to see, even in the twilight, that it was surprisingly large. It was more than a typical cowtown or miners' haven, that was sure. He stared for a few minutes, puzzled. There seemed to be no sign of a military establishment.

In a few minutes they were in the town—at least on its outskirts. Suddenly the stage ground to a halt with a screaming of tortured brakes. Ward half-opened the door.

"What's the matter?" he called to the driver.

"You want to get off at the "Post" I reckon. Well, this is it." The driver gestured to a long low-lying hut just off the road. To one side of it was a smaller building, a simple cabin. A staff was mounted in front of it. It could only be a flag pole.

Ward threw back his head and laughed as he appreciated the size of his new Army "Post." The driver grinned.

"Ain't much to look at, eh, Lieutenant?" he said. He helped his guard unload Ward's two trunks and a suitcase from the roof of the stage. In a minute the stage rumbled off toward the heart of the town into the fast-gathering darkness. Ward stood beside his small store of possessions, and started to make himself presentable. Then, leaving his baggage by the side of the road he walked toward the small cabin in front of the long low-lying building. Sure enough! There was a small wooden plaque beside the door which read: "Headquarters, Seventh United States Cavalry. David Winslow, Capt. Command."

Ward straightened his shoulders, adjusted his hat. There was a light within the building. He stepped up to the door and knocked.

"Come in," a tired voice said. Ward opened the door and stepped in. Behind the desk facing him, was a grey haired middle-aged man in a captain's uniform. Ward stepped up to the desk and saluted. It was casually returned.

"Lieutenant Ward Sloane wishes to report for duty to Captain David Winslow . . ."

"That's all right, Lieutenant," Winslow interrupted him, "I've been expecting you." He stood up and stuck out his hand. "I'm glad to have you with us, Lieutenant. We need every man we can get."

"Im glad to be here, sir, but I will admit I was surprised to find so small a post."

WINSLOW smiled. It was a smile laden with fatigue, Ward thought. Ward knew automatically that he was going to like this man.

"Yes," Winslow agreed, "it surprises everybody, including me." He turned to the side and called "Orderly!" A private came from in back of the office space. "Pick up Lieutenant Sloane's baggage and put it in my room. Lieutenant Sloane will bunk with me." The man left to do his bidding.

"I hope you don't mind," Winslow said. "We're short of space. We sleep in this cabin-office. That low-lying building in back of here is the barracks. My forty-five men are cramped even there."

The private came back shortly with most of Ward's equipment, including his sabre and carbine. He stored it in the back room.

"Sit down, Lieutenant, while I explain what we're doing here. When we're through you can get cleaned up and look over the town. Lester, bring us some port. Now here's the story . . ."

Winslow began explaining the situation, pacing up and down in front of a map of the territory, while they both sipped at the glasses of wine brought by the orderly. San Ruyez was a peaceful settlement of Mexicans and Americans, acting mostly as a center of contact for the surrounding farmers and cattlemen. The town was Mexican on the south side and Americans filled the rest. Then about thirty miles to the north of the town gold was discovered. Naturally adventurers poured in by the thousands. Miners, ex-soldiers, gamblers and all sorts of criminals poured into the town changing it from a relatively well-run and peaceful establishment to a hothouse of trouble. Shootings and stabbings were frequent. Robbery was common. Finally groups of legitimate miners, representatives from the Mexican section of the town and American townspeople all got together and requested a detachment of troops, to keep order. Their own sheriffs and policing forces were helpless. Colonel Atweiler sent Captain Winslow with forty-five men—all the men he could spare—to take up residence in the town. But it had not improved conditions much for the simple reason that there were not enough soldiers to do the job. Captain Winslow pointed out to Ward that most of his men were assigned in groups of six or eight men to act as cavalry escorts to gold trains from the mines and later from the town. Raiders who had been ravaging these trains prior to the advent of the Army now left them severely alone. But conditions in the town were still bad. And the crooks were getting bolder. Several times soldiers had been beaten up. One man had been killed—Captain Winslow had been making out the report when Ward came in—and now, bandits had launched several attacks on gold-trains from the mines in spite of the soldiers guarding them. So far they had not succeeded in capturing any of the trains because the soldiers and the non-coms in charge of them were pretty good, but that was no guarantee that they couldn't be beaten.

"You can see what a problem I've got, Sloane," Winslow concluded. "The town is wide open because the troops are needed to guard gold trains. And now attacks are taking place even on them. The townspeople are terrified. It's a terrific headache."

"Well," Ward said, "it seems to me, sir, that this thing is pretty well organized. These bandits must be working under orders. There must be a ringleader."

Winslow grinned wryly. "Didn't I say anything about him? Yes, there's a ringleader all right. The only trouble is, I can't touch him. He's clever. His name is Johnny Claymore and on the surface he runs the Nugget and the Golden Nest, two of the rottenest saloons and gambling dives in the town. They're just down the street. You'll see 'em when you go into town. I know and everybody else in town knows that he's behind half the skullduggery that goes on around here. But the good citizens haven't the guts to come to a showdown with him, and I can't touch him because I have no right to, nor have I any proof—legal, formal proof, that is—that would stand up in court.

WARD didn't say anything but his mind was working like a steam engine. Winslow sat down behind his desk and stared bitterly toward the door. "My hands are tied completely," he said. "Colonel Atweiler will keep getting reports from me and he'll wonder what's wrong. A man shot, a couple of men wounded. That'll go on for a while. Then he'll pull me out of here and someone else will get it. Oh, eventually, the town will be cleaned up but God knows how many good men will get it before it is." Captain Winslow sat up suddenly.

"I shouldn't be telling you this, Lieutenant. You'll think the Army has gone to hell."

"Captain Winslow," Ward said slowly, "I'm glad you have taken me into your confidence. I have an idea. The only men that saw me come into town tonight were the stage drivers. I don't imagine they've said anything about me. Why don't I go into town as a private investigator?"

Winslow looked at Ward keenly. He slammed his fist against the table with a bang. "Lieutenant Sloane, that's perfect! That's exactly what you'll do. From this minute on consider yourself on detached service. I'll talk to my orderly and we'll get clothes for you . . ."

* * *

AN HOUR and a half later Lieutenant Ward Sloane was walking toward the center of the town where activity was at its height. But he wasn't an army officer now; the transformation was complete. Ward wore only a shirt and a pair of ill fitting pants. His trousers were stuffed into a pair of boots and he looked like any newcomer to the town, possibly looking for a chance to get into the gold fields. His day's growth of beard gave him an older appearance and added the right amount of carelessness to his dress. Nothing unusual could be attached to the fact he wore a Colt .45 around his waist in a badly battered holster. The fact that it was an army holster with a cover indicated that its owner was not a professional gunman. He had only one thought in mind—to get Johnny Claymore.

As Ward walked along the road leading into the gay section of town, he felt like cheering. While he knew the assignment was dangerous, it was the very thing he wanted. This was no routine Army job. This was high adventure and Ward was young enough to appreciate it. From talking with Captain Winslow Ward had acquired an appreciation of the man. Winslow was no dyed-in-the-wool old fashioned Army man. He was willing and able to try something new. Mentally Ward considered how many officers would have given him such a job.

They had agreed that Ward was to play fairly dumb. He was just looking for a job if anyone should question him. Somehow he was to worm his way into the confidence of anyone near Johnny Claymore so that he could get any information that would lead them to any proposed robberies or disturbances.

Winslow hadn't told him a great deal more because there was simply so little to tell. It was up to Ward to use his own ingenuity and skill in getting the goods on Claymore.

Winslow had told him that the Nugget was Claymore's headquarters. He headed right for the spot. As he threaded his way through the town, Ward was surprised and pleased at the evident industry of the town. And it was charming and beautiful as well, but the main street now was mainly a double row of drinking and gambling places.

In spite of the lateness of the hour there was a profusion of people. Miners, a few soldiers, gamblers, farmers, cattlemen and Mexicans, mingled indiscriminately, though every now and then Ward detected looks of fear and hatred on the faces of the Mexicans as they were jostled by their white compatriots.

When he passed a soldier, Ward almost instinctively answered a salute that wasn't given. It was hard to get rid of the mechanical details of military training.

Ward entered the swinging doors of the Nugget and was almost bowled over by the racket that greeted his ears. Shouting, roaring miners were buying drinks for everybody. An orchestra blared out music for a floor jammed with dancers—mostly "girls" imported by Claymore, Ward found out—and chuck-a-luck, roulette, straight crap games and dozens of other gambling operations were also going full blast. Nobody paid the slightest attention to him as he worked his way through the crowd toward the jammed bar. By dint of much effort he managed to squeeze next to the bar and to get himself a little space.

A drink was set before him and he slapped down a silver dollar to pay for it. Around him he noticed many of the miners paying for their liquor and their gambling with gold dust from little chamois bags. From what he could see of the way the gold dust was weighed in the crude horn balances that were used, the miners were being thoroughly cheated. But being half drunk or fully drunk they didn't seem to care. The attitude was easy come, easy go.

A BALCONY ran around the saloon at a second story level. It was obvious that private games were going on in some of the rooms that bordered the balcony. There was a huge sign over the bar which read, "All fights must be settled outside the Nugget, (signed) Mr. Claymore."

Two or three men lounged on the rail of the balcony and kept watch on the crowd. It was apparent that they were toughs of Claymore's. Ward tried not to make himself suspicious to them by watching too closely.

He struck up a conversation with a relatively sober man alongside him. He pointed Claymore out to Ward, when that man stepped out on the balcony for a brief look at the crowd. Ward got a good look at him.

He was a handsome man, not more than thirty-five, and he was impeccably dressed. There was no gun visible on him, but Ward would have sworn that the bulge under his left armpit concealed a Derringer, the only weapon that could be worn with such dressy clothes without spoiling their lines.

There was a sardonic smile on Claymore's face as he watched the money and the gold dust roll in. He looked the crowd over quickly and then returned to the room from which he had come. Ward noticed the deference with which his men treated him. It was easy to tell who was boss.

After a couple of drinks, Ward left the saloon, and strolled around the town, more or less orienting himself. The Golden Nest, where he stopped a little while, was practically a duplicate of the Nugget and it was doing just as flourishing a business. There were other drinking places but Ward noticed that none of them had gambling. It was clear that Claymore had the town tied up. By casually dropping a hint here and there in a conversation with a bartender, Ward got the story that Claymore left other saloons besides his own operate—for a fee—but only on the condition that they had no gambling. Here was a racketeer on a grand scale. No wonder the troops were helpless to really crack down.

About two o'clock in the morning things began to quiet down considerably, and when Ward went by the Nugget, he could see that it was closed. But there were lights in the second story. Something was going on. What he would have given to be there!

As he strolled past, he made out the structure of the building. The first floor, as was common with two story buildings, jutted out considerably farther than the second. A rail-less veranda almost ran entirely around the building. What was to stop him from climbing to it and eavesdropping? With Ward, to think was to act. Carefully he left the main street and made his way to the side of the Nugget. The only light came from the windows on the second floor. The darkness combined with the shadows of the surrounding trees, eliminated any possibility of detection from the street. He had to hope that there were no guards on the veranda.

It was a simple matter for athletic, soldierly Ward to shinny up a supporting post. In a moment he was on the veranda-like roof, five feet from the open windows from which light poured. Before he did another thing, Ward unfastened the cover of his holster and made sure the forty-five was loose and easy to draw. Then on his hands and knees he crept toward a window; he could hear voices distinctly. One was a deep, resonant commanding voice, without question, Claymore's. He was saying:

". . . and you'll take eleven men, Olson. The gold train is made up of only four mules but they're packing forty thousand dollars worth of dust. Make sure that the six men guarding it don't live. Got it?"

"But what about the soldiers, Mr. Claymore?" another voice asked, and Ward noticed the intense deference in the word "Mr." There was no question of who was boss.

"There won't be any soldiers with this bunch, Olson. Too many trains and not enough soldiers. That fool Winslow can't do a thing. But let me warn you; if by any chance there should be soldiers, forget about the whole thing. We killed one and we don't want it to happen again. They're liable to get really tough, and it's bad enough having the soldiers around without getting a bunch more. If they get too many here and clamp down with martial law, we're sunk. So don't kill any more soldiers, understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Claymore."

Ward stuck his head up just enough to peer into the room. Claymore's back was to him. He was seated at a desk on which a lunch tray lay. To one side was a sheaf of papers. A half dozen other men were in the room. It was a pseudo-military establishment with Claymore issuing the orders like a commanding general and his henchmen obeying like Army privates.

"The rest of you clear out of here. Lanning, bring in the girl." Claymore snapped out the orders and the others moved fast. This new development caught Ward's interest. Who was the girl? Winslow hadn't said anything about a girl. Raising his head a little, Ward watched closely.

THE door opened and a girl stepped into Claymore's office. She was so beautiful she took Ward's breath away. She was a classic example of aristocratic Spanish loveliness at its best.

She wore a long gown, over which was thrown a black opera cape. A graceful lace mantilla covered her raven black hair. Her features were calm, but Ward could sense the smouldering fire beneath. As she entered, Claymore rose.

"Good evening, Senorita. It is an unexpected pleasure to see the sister of Juan di Flores at this hour." He stepped around the desk as if to take her hand. Abruptly the girl stopped. Cold anger was in her face and her nostrils flared. Claymore stepped back. His eyes narrowed.

"Stay away from me, toad!" the girl hissed. "I hate you and your kind."

Ward could see the back of Claymore's neck redden under the epithet. He sat down. His next words were cold and precise.

"You're hardly in a position to antagonize me, Estrella. I wouldn't advise it. Now what do you want?"

Some of the anger drained from the girl's face. Fear replaced it. Her voice, with the barest trace of a liquid Spanish accent, dropped in tone, one less of request than of pleading.

"Senor Claymore, I want to buy back the property my brother sold you. I will give you drafts on the Bank of San Francisco this evening if you wish."

"How much will you pay me for the land whose title I hold now?" Claymore asked, his voice still cold as ice.

The girl looked up. "Of course, Senor, exactly what you paid for it plus five thousand dollars—a total of forty-five thousand dollars."

Claymore threw back his head and laughed. It was a laugh filled with insult. It was mockery. The girl's face grew white with anger and humiliation. At that instant Ward wanted to leap through the window and strangle Claymore. He managed to restrain himself.

In his intensity of straining to see everything, Ward was a little less than cautious. He heard a sound. It was a footstep on the roof that he was on. He ducked and looked to the side. A figure was running across the roof toward him. Without hesitating, Ward pulled his forty-five free and fired. The shot rang through the night and the figure coming toward him stopped in its tracks, dropped to the slightly slanting roof without a sound and started to roll off. At the same time, Ward felt iron arms go around his throat. The gun was wrenched from his hand, strong arms threw him through the window where he had so lately been eavesdropping.

Ward, still dazed from the suddenness of the happenings, looked up at Claymore and the girl. Claymore had a Derringer in his hand. The girl was frightened. Three men were in the act of climbing through the window which a moment before had been Ward's listening post.

"He shot Whitey, Mister Claymore. Right through the throat—the dirty rat," the first man said bitterly. He aimed a kick at Ward which caught him in the side of the head and almost knocked him out. Ward's senses reeled but he dragged himself to.

"Stop it! You fool." Claymore said. "Who is he? What's he doing here?"

"We don't know. Me and the boys caught him by your window listenin' in. He plugged Whitey before the rest of us could get to him. None of us seen him before. He must be new around town."

Claymore put away his Derringer now that Ward was under the sixguns of the three men. Senorita Estrella said nothing but she was looking at him with a curious interest.

"Who are you?" Claymore asked. Wayne said nothing. Another kick came his way. It caught him in the side. Ward winced in agony. He kept still.

Claymore shrugged his shoulders. "He's probably one of the vigilantes or maybe one of the miners. Take him out. You know what to do with him." He turned back to the girl.

"Stand up, you," one of the henchmen said. Wearily Ward got to his feet. They searched him but found nothing. Meanwhile Ward's mind was working furiously. He had to think of something. In a very few minutes he'd be dead unless he figured out something. His captors prodded him toward the door.

CLAYMORE was ignoring the whole incident already and was trying to talk with the girl. Ward heard her words of pleading. Only hope kept back her anger and hatred for the man.

"Wait!" Ward called. "I don't think it'll be such a good idea to have me murdered. There might be some trouble—and besides I want to live a little while longer."

"Shut up!" The three men started to drag him toward the door.

"Claymore! Stop your men! I'm Lieutenant Ward Sloane. U. S. Army. When Captain Winslow finds out about this, God help you!" Ward shouted.

Claymore whirled around. For a moment Ward thought he detected fright on the man's face.

"Stop. Hold him a minute."

Talking fast, Ward explained who he was. And just as calmly he pointed out what he was trying to do. Claymore listened impassively, his attention completely diverted from the girl. He motioned to the three men to release Ward. They stepped back while Estrella stepped toward another corner of the room.

Quietly, Claymore said: "Sit down, Lieutenant. I believe you are an officer in the Army—but I think that in spite of it, you're an intelligent man. I might add though, you haven't behaved very wisely till now." Claymore was all charm and courtesy again. He offered Ward a glass of wine and lit a cigar for him. But Ward noticed that Claymore didn't dismiss his three henchmen.

A grin of amusement came over Ward's face. He had more than an inkling of what was going to happen.

"If you are an Army officer," Claymore went on,—"and I think you are in spite of the lack of proof, you have behaved like a fool. I suppose you intended to get some 'information' on me. You knew as did Winslow, that I was the leader of these difficulties in San Ruyez. But the thing you forget is that you can't touch me legally. So why try to accumulate such ridiculous bits of evidence such as you might have overheard in any of my conversations in this room. Before I tell you my plans for you, Lieutenant, I had better explain my own position."

Ward listened without commenting. He knew what was coming. The colossal gall of this man! But he said nothing—merely allowed him to go on.

"I'll be frank; I want power, Lieutenant—lots of it. And I'm going to have it. Nothing on heaven or earth will stop me. This valley, this town and all the surrounding land will belong to me and mine. Furthermore, that gold strike which is just a big enough wild cat to supply me with ready cash, will soon peter out. By the time that happens, I will have absolute mastery over this land. The only possible thing that could stop me would be a very strong military law. Now that's where you come in, Lieutenant. If I kill you—and I'll probably have to—your commanding officer might get more help from Washington. On the other hand, if things go on as they are, he'll most likely be pulled right out of his command and another man substituted. There is a rare chance that not killing you would help me. I'm giving you that chance. If you don't take it, I'll have you killed. And I don't think my regime will be hurt too much.

"I could use a military man on my side. That's where you come in, Lieutenant. I'm sure that we could do business together beautifully. Captain Winslow refused my offer, but then he is a very stupid man. That's confirmed by his sending you here. If you will assist me, Lieutenant, there will be a great deal of money in your hands, there will be no trouble for your troops, and we'll get along famously."

IN SPITE of his revulsion at this snake's proposal for treachery, Ward was fascinated with the man's egotism. In fact, he was almost hypnotized. Ward thought a great deal more of Captain Winslow now that he realized he had refused Claymore's advances. A weaker man would readily have joined him.

"Well, Lieutenant, what do you say?" Claymore leaned forward. He was sure this young man had fallen to the great temptation.

Ward laughed. It wasn't a pleasant laugh. Rather it was charged with all the contempt that he could muster. He looked Claymore straight in the eye.

"Mr. Claymore," Ward said softly, "your proposal is as rotten as you are. I wouldn't touch it with a ten foot pole." He turned toward the three men standing in back of him. "Come on," he said, "take me out and shoot me. Anything to get away from this stench."

Claymore whitened. "Very well," he snarled, "you've made your choice. Go ahead, boys."

The three men stepped forward to take Ward's arms, when suddenly there was a tinkle of laughter from the corner of the room. Estrella's voice came gently across the room.

"Will all of you please put up your hands?"

Ward's heart leaped with joy. Completely forgotten in the course of the discussion, she had taken over, with a six-gun!—held in both tiny hands.

Slowly, Claymore and the three cronies raised their hands. "Hurry," the girl snapped, "or I'll shoot."

"Lieutenant—" she started to say but needn't have for Ward had scooped out a gun almost as soon as she spoke.

"Senorita, I must thank you," Ward said. She stepped to his side. The three men watched them closely. "Stand against the wall," Ward said. "You too," he gestured toward Claymore.

The three men did as they were told. "Wait a moment," Estrella said, "Claymore get the papers from the safe —those deeds my brother turned over to you."

"Right you are," Ward said smilingly. Estrella removed the bank drafts from her cloak and set them on Claymore's desk. "The sale is completed," she asserted, "as soon as you give the papers to me."

Claymore reluctantly went over to the safe. His eye barely flickered as he went past his three men with their backs to the wall. He bent down and started to manipulate the dial on the safe. With a click of tumblers, it opened; he reached into its depths and brought forth some papers. He reached in again. Suddenly he whirled around. In his hand was a Derringer. He must have chosen his most dangerous opponent, he thought, for the first shot snapped not at the girl but at Ward. Ward felt a red hot poker graze his side. He was knocked to the floor by the shock.

Estrella fired twice, her gloved hands steady and calm, realizing that she wielded the figurative sword of justice. Her first bullet caught Claymore in the face, smashing it to a bloody pulp.

The three men who had instantly jumped Ward stepped back as her second bullet hit the shoulder of one of them. The other two left their fellow writhing on the floor.

Before anything else could be said or done, Estrella tucked the papers Claymore had removed from the safe, under her cloak.

"And now," she said, "are you all right, Senor Sloane?"

Ward smiled at her. "Yes, thanks to you. May I have the honor of escorting you home Senorita?"

Her laugh tinkled again. "I will take *you* to your Post, Senor. It is you who needs assistance."

Ward smiled wryly.

"We will leave together for my Post and I'll see that you get a full cavalry escort back to your estancia. And . . ." he glanced at her strangely, ". . . I really should like to take you home."

"You may, Senor," she said. The two of them left the room after Ward tied the hands of the former leader of San Ruyez's men. Ward found that it was delightful leaning his injured self against the delicate form of Senorita Estrella. He was quite sure that he was going to like garrison life in San Ruyez. Maybe the Army assignments weren't so boring after all.

He turned to Estrella as they walked up the street. There was no fear of pursuit. The backbone of the evil had been broken a minute ago by an honest citizen—in self defense.

"You know, Senorita Estrella," Ward murmured in her ear which was invitingly close to his face, "I like you."

Bewitchingly, Estrella smiled back. "Senor Sloane, you know, I think I like you too!"

RATTLESNAKE RANGE

by A. Morris

THE Southwest, particularly desert areas. is still laden with rattlers. No spot on Earth can compare with the Double K ranch near Yuma, Arizona. This range was owned by Carl and Jake Cairn, brothers who had gotten staked by a good friend who practically gave them the land.

But there was a catch in it. This occured back in the Eighties and consequently it made mild reading for the readers of the local newspaper. They were case-hardened to this sort of thing.

The Double K was literally and actually a haven for rattlesnakes. Exactly what made the land so desirable to them is a subject requiring more than fancy. For three months after taking over the land, the two brothers did nothing but ride over the land with six-guns in their hands, shooting almost at random. It was a glorious and hideous snake-killing party.

There were many narrow escapes. At first the brothers shot from horseback but they found it particularly dangerous because the animals would shy and rear at the first indication of a snake, throwing their riders. Once Carl was hurled directly on a huge rattler sunning himself on a flat rock, and only his instinctive reflexes managed to throw him away from the monster quickly enough to avoid getting bitten.

There were many other narrow escapes associated with the hunt, but eventually enough of the snakes were killed to make Carl and Jake the St. Patrick's of the town. Several other spots in the United States have reported similar conditions where for some reason or other snakes have congregated in large and dangerous numbers.

* * *

THE LUCK OF JOHN STRAIN

by J. R. Marks

JOHN STRAIN was a professional gambler in California during the gold rush days. He'd sit in a saloon at a gambling table all night and sleep most of the day. Late in the afternoon he would take a pick and pan and scratch around a bit in the tailings in abandoned tailraces.

One day he stopped out in Santiago Gulch to watch an old miner at work forking rocks out of his sluice. Strain noticed a glint in one of the rocks that the miner tossed out beyond the limits of his claim. If he had been a very honest man he would have tossed it back to the miner, but instead he asked very casually if anyone claimed this ground just below the old miner's. He was told that it had all been worked over and abandoned because there was nothing there. Strain told him that he might be mistaken and asked for paper and wrote out his claim with the old miner as witness. Then he drove in his stakes and walked over and picked up the rock that the miner had tossed away. He showed it to the miner and said, "If you are in the habit of throwaway pieces like this, my claim ought to be worth quite a bit." He put it under his arm and took it into town where it brought a couple thousand dollars. The miner sued Strain to get it back, but the judge ruled that when he forked it out he abandoned it. Strain had picked it up on his own claim, and it was his according to law.

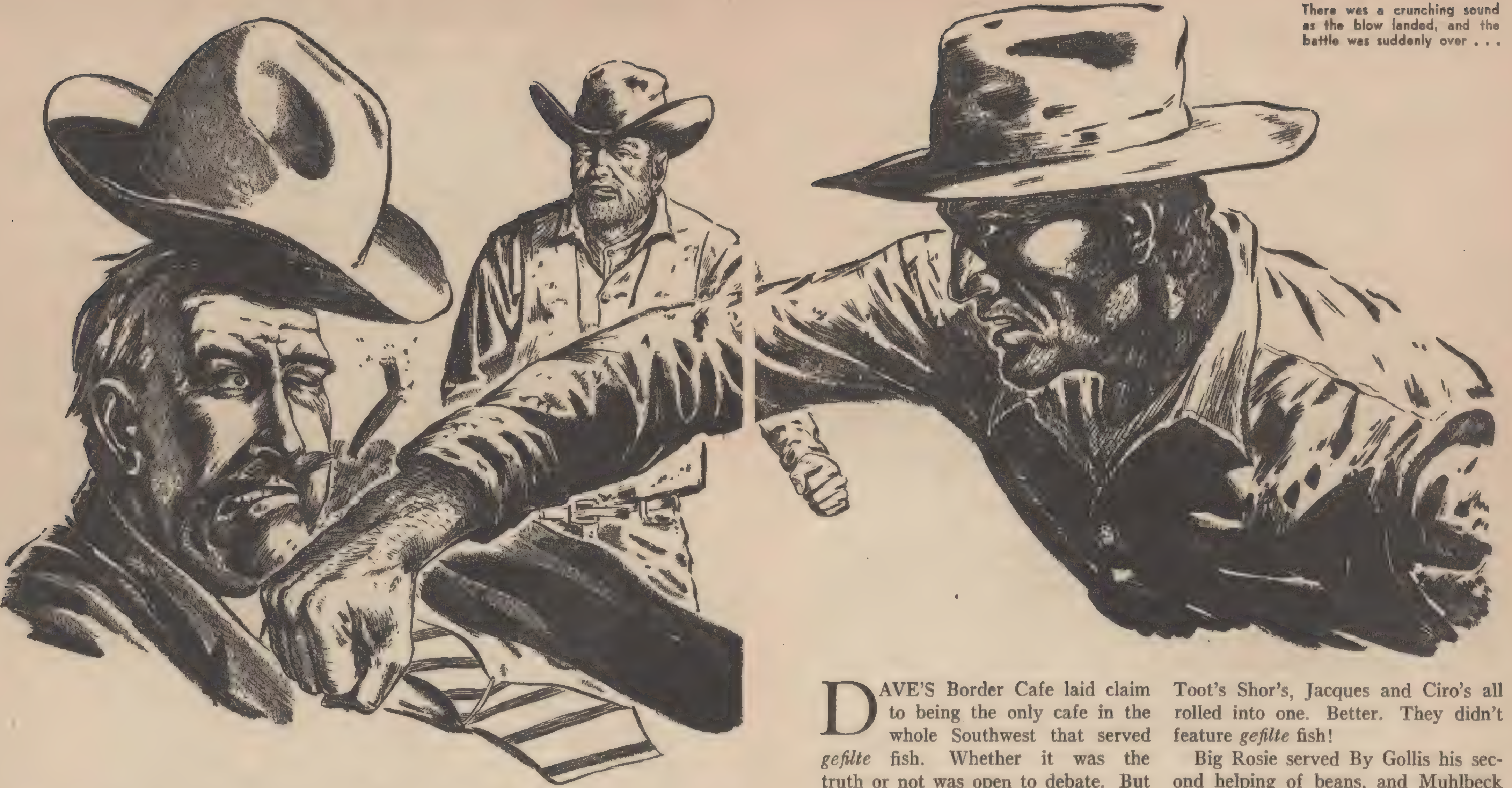
On another occasion, Mr. Strain was walking along a creek looking for a nice clear place to get a drink of water. He noticed a glittering reflection in the bottom of the little stream. So he rolled up his pantlegs and waded in and pulled out a chunk of gold twelve inches long and ten inches wide and six inches thick. At that time it was worth a bit less than eight thousand dollars. It was probably the biggest piece of free gold ever picked up in Columbia.

Mr. Strain put all his money in his pocket, and took a table at a gambling house in San Francisco for a while. Then he wandered through the mining towns of California and Nevada till he finally went broke. He came back to Columbia in hopes of finding the vein that his gold piece had come from, but his eyes were not as sharp as they had been, and his gambler's luck had turned cold. He found no more fortune. He was too proud to ask for charity, and one day a neighbor found him dead in his cabin. There was no doubt about it that this man who had had so many lucky finds in the past, had died of starvation.

DON'T CALL ME MUCKER!

By Lester Barclay

A mucker may not always be dressed in the latest fashions, but he packs as much pride as the next man—and usually a bigger wallop . . .



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DAVE'S Border Cafe laid claim to being the only cafe in the whole Southwest that served *gefilte* fish. Whether it was the truth or not was open to debate. But that it was the *only* cafe in Nogales, Arizona that did, was beyond doubt.

Certainly it was a popular dish. Or maybe it was that Dave's was air-conditioned and the railroad men on the Southern Pacific fresh off the line, hot, tired and dusty, felt a new stirring of life when they walked in. At any rate, Dave's was the most popular dining place in Nogales.

To Ed 'By Gollis' Burris and his partner, John Muhlbeck, there was no place in the world like Dave's. It was Toot's Shor's, Jacques and Ciro's all rolled into one. Better. They didn't feature *gefilte* fish!

Big Rosie served By Gollis his second helping of beans, and Muhlbeck his second coffee and took away the rest of the dishes. She returned in a moment with a large sheet of plain white paper.

"By gollis," By Gollis said. "Now there's what I calls real service, Rosie. Now effen I could get my arms about you . . ."

"Like tryin' to wrassle wit' a truck," Muhlbeck said sourly. "She ain't built for love wrasslin'."

"Shet up, Muhly," By Gollis said. "Now look what you done. The gal's

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It was true. Big Rosie's face, which had once been summed up in a phrase, by Sheriff McGampsy, as being as 'close to what a punkin would look like were it to have a nose, mouth and pair of eyes,' was wrinkled full of puckers. She wrestled herself around on her heels and started off at a half-trot toward the kitchen in the rear.

"Now look what you done, blast ye, Muhly!" By Gollis roared so loudly the Mexican busboy dropped a whole tray of glassware in fright. "Can't ye keep that big mouth shet?"

"Okay! O-kay," Muhlbeck tried conciliation. "I'm sorry. But it beats me how you allus try to soft-soap the . . ."

"I like her! That's why," By Gollis said dourly. "I like big women. Allus did. My maw was built big, an' so was my granmaw. They ain't got a bit of spite in 'em, least I never run across one that did. Now that's settled, lemme eat my beans . . ."

Muhlbeck gulped his coffee in several hasty and loudly audible gulps. His narrowed, mean-looking eyes surveyed his partner across the rim of the cup in speculative intent. He wondered how any man could eat as many beans as By Gollis did and still love them the way he did. Of course By Gollis was big, stood better than six-foot—strong as a mule, too. Damn near lifted that ore car high as his waist the time it run over Muhlbeck's foot. But Lord! Beans was one of their staples up at Lost Chance. . . .

By Gollis forked the last of the beans into the cavern of his mouth, belched, and wiped his sun-cracked lips on an immense red bandana.

"Now I'm set for ye," he said. "By Gollis! After a meal like that a man's in the mood for anything. Gotta tell Dave the fish was extry good today."

He looked toward the front of the restaurant where the cashier's desk stood. A puzzled frown worried new lines in his forehead. Neither Dave nor his wife were behind the counter. Instead, Little Rosie, a neatly-built comely Mexican girl, stood watch over the register. Neither he nor Muhlbeck had noticed the absence of the proprietor and his wife when they walked in.

BUT Muhlbeck had neither eyes nor ears for his partner. The instant By Gollis had reached for his kerchief, Muhlbeck pulled the thick stub of pencil he carried in one of his hip pockets, out, and moistening it with his tongue, drew a series of lines freehand on the immaculate paper. He bent his head close to the paper, and as he wrote his tongue worked out between his lips in an odd rhythm with the movement of his hand.

"O-kay," he said after a moment. "Ready, shoot!"

By Gollis cocked his head ceilingward. His mouth hung open, a human fly trap. His eyes were half-closed and his chin developed a series of concentric rings from the lower lip to the point. By Gollis was lost in thought. To the uninitiated the man looked as if he'd fallen asleep.

Suddenly the wide thin lips smacked loudly against each other several times, the eyes opened fully, and the head came down.

"Muhly," he began, "I don't think we got to go through with this infarnal figurin'. We know how things stack up. Next week, come Satiday night, we got to take up the option. . . ."

But John Muhlbeck was not called Muhly because it was a contraction of his name. It was for that peculiar streak of stubbornness which possessed him and was native, as By Gollis said, 'only to Muhly and a Jennie.' At this moment the streak came to light.

"I got it right here!" he said, one horny finger pointing to the lettering in one of the boxes he had drawn on the paper. See. *Option!* But damn it to pyrites! Might as well do things right. Now let's start at the top. *Man hours.* . . ."

By Gollis placed his hairy forearms on the table, rocking it slightly, and stared hard at the lettering.

"Plenty!" he declaimed loudly. "More than the consarned lease calls for. A hunert an' eighty two. All we need. . . ."

"I know," Muhleck said with a patience which was strange to his nature and which only showed life in respect to his partner. "The lease calls for one hundred man hours. I just wanted the figgers. *Royalty's next.* . . ."

By Gollis nodded gravely. "Yeah," he said softly. "Royalty. The hook they used for a couple of fishes, named Muhlbeck and Burris. Eighty-twenty, they said, the best in the west. . . ."

"O-kay," Muhlbeck said. "*Development.* . . ."

"*Development!*" By Gollis' voice lost a little of its softness. "A foot per man hour. Twelve hundred feet a year. Not bad, eh? Except for the leetle catch; *in a vertical line.* . . . An' what about stopping? Did they put that in? Not those hard-rock money-sharks in Tucson! An' I thought the land-sharks in Ioway was tough babies. . . ."

Muhlbeck sighed. By Gollis was right. But hell! They hadn't figgered those lease holders would play the game that way. It was true that they'd been warned. Still. . . . He sighed again.

"No use cappin' the load of shot yore carryin'. Let's get on with it. *Lease. . .*"

This time By Gollis exploded. His voice, never so soft that the man in the next county couldn't hear it, trumpeted its anger into every corner of the spacious restaurant:

"*LEASE!* High binders! high graders! Pyrite peddlers! An' they called it a lease! Soft-soap an' forked-tongue go well hand-in-hand. Sure, eighty-twenty royalties, hunert man-hours per month. Everythin' just dandy. Sign on the dotted line, men. You develop, we take over . . . Muhly, we been taken. I know that line by heart. *If the provisions, stipulations and conditions have been duly carried out as provided for in said contract.* . . ." He stopped and his red-rimmed grey eyes looked deeply and bitterly into those of his partner. "Where we gonna get six thousand dollars, Muhly? We ain't hit that body yet. An' we barely make expenses on that low-grade copper we been shippin'."

Muhlbeck leaned back and folded his hands across his chest. Resolution and anger clouded his eyes. By Gollis spoke the truth. But there were things to be said for the lease holders.

"Wait, By Gollis," he said after a few seconds' cogitation. "Yore forgettin' we got a year's lease. Yore forgettin' that when you found that old map we said we'd chance it on the money we had. Sure they want the property developed. They probably got plenty invested in land. But they offered a five-year renewal on the lease and options of five-year renewals. How was they to know we couldn't scare up the money?"

BY GOLLIS shook his head in agreement. Muhly was right. But the bitter taste still remained. He thought back on a month before during their week-end stay in Nogales. In sheer desperation they had approached the town's banker on a loan.

"Now I like you fellers," Jenks had said in his I'm-a-brother-in-the-lodge manner. "But shucks! Six thousand dollars as a loan takes a lotta collateral. An' I know for a fact that you fellers just don't have it. Personally, I feel that it would be a good thing for the community that Lost Chance gets to become big. After all, another Copper Queen is something I'd like nothing better to see. Something else. Six thousand won't be enough," his voice had changed in some mysterious fashion and the bluff hearty manner he had assumed on their entrance was also gone. His words were clipped, harsh. "It'd take about ten, because six only takes care of the lease. Sorry. . . . "

By Gollis, always the one to shoot off his mouth without thinking, had put in about the map:

"Mister Jenks! We ain't got the collateral it's true. But I know there's more than copper there. Everybody knows Lost Chance is one of the oldest properties in Arizona. Those old Mission Indians worked it a couple hunert years back an' they took *silver* from it. That's why we need the money. There's silver *still* there! An' I got me a map I bought from an old Indian. . . ."

The two men were startled speechless by the sudden booming laughter of the banker. Tears rolled down the plump cheeks and his paunch shook like a jello mold.

"Oh dear!" Jenks sighed windily after the paroxysm of laughter had ceased. "That map! Only an Iowa farmer and," he paused deliberately, then spat out the opprobrious phrase, "a *white mucker* from Nevada. . . ."

His mouth closed quite suddenly. Muhlbeck had fists the size of large grapefruits, and of the hardness of the ore which came out of the tunnel of the Lost Chance. Muhlbeck had driven the right fist into Jenks' mouth with all the power of his shoulder muscles and weight behind it. Jenks puffed his cheeks as though he had a mouthful of bile, but when he spat it was only to rid himself of the blood and a half dozen teeth which had come loose.

By Gollis had acted almost as swiftly as his partner. Fortunately for Jenks that he had. For it was only by exerting his terrific strength to the full that By Gollis was able to hold the other back.

"That was for 'Tonio, and Diaz and Joe," Muhlbeck shouted. "A couple of other *white* muckers. . . ."

By Gollis had lifted his partner off the floor, and had lugged him out of Jenks' office. But not before Jenks had mumbled through the lacerated lips:

" . . . Even. I'll get even. . . ."

By Gollis blinked his eyes rapidly. How real the vision had been. And suddenly he burst into a bellow of laughter. His partner looked blankly at him, then Muhlbeck's face darkened.

"What the hell's got into you?" he asked in savage tones.

"By gollis!" By Gollis said gaspingly. "I was just thinking of the time you hit that fat-bottomed Jenks. . . . An' how later we went out an' bought four fifths of whiskey for the lot of us an' celebrated and we all wound up in the tunnel, stiff as hoot owls on a spree an' how we woke up with those damn mason wasps tryin' to build a nest in our mouths. . . ."

Muhlbeck grinned as memory made a clear picture in his mind.

"Yeah. That sure made me mad. *White* mucker, he called me. As if Diaz and Joe and the others wasn't. Man, we sure got drunk that night."

"Aah," a voice straining hard in synthetic pity called from just to the right of their table. "The brothers Guggenheim, I presume. And how is the Copper Queen of the Patagonia hills doing?"

It was Jenks, a grin of derision set on lips from the corners of which drops of sweat hung like dew. He had more sense than to stop. There was more important business he had to attend to than the baiting of the luckless partners. But he couldn't help giving them a dig in passing. He didn't have the last say, however.

For By Gollis grinned in return and said:

"That bridge the dentist put in don't fit so good. Keep talkin', Mister, and he'll have a job for a new one. . . ."

JENKS' mouth closed in a rosebud pout and his hips swung fattily, like those of a stout woman without her foundation garment on. The redness which suddenly flushed the whole back of his suet-covered neck told only too well of the frustrated anger he felt. But neither of the two men sitting heard the muttered words:

"Laugh, damn you both. I said I'd even up. Not long now, and I'll have the best laugh, the last one. . . ."

Jenks' eyes, blue and cold as lake water, found the man sitting in the last booth next to the swinging door which led to the kitchen. He was alone, just as he said he would be. Jenks dropped heavily into the seat opposite. The two would not have found comfort in sitting together.

"They got good fish here," the man said.

"Yes," Jenks said absently. "Place is famous for it."

"Ain't had none in a month of Sundays. Nice beans. H'm. Maybe I'll come back after I get through with my business. Nice town. . . ."

The word "business," brought Jenks to the present.

"Better not," he said pointedly. "But I didn't come here to talk beans and fish. Let's get down to it. How many men will you use?"

The other found a drawn-out pleasure in the use of a toothpick. He had the sort of teeth for which a screw driver would have been the better implement for picking. His face was long, lean, brick-red from the sun, and the reddest, longest part of his face was the nose. His lantern-jaw was clean shaven, but his upper lip, which protruded oddly above the lower, showed tiny patches of sandy fuzz, as though he had shaved it in the dark. He finished picking his teeth and turned narrowed, green eyes toward Jenks.

"The job will run you a thousand dollars whether I work alone or not. That's because you want someone shot. . . . I said shot, not killed. But I guarantee that they won't be there. . . ."

"I changed my mind," Jenks broke in.

The other lifted his head sharply, shrugged wide, thin shoulders and started to get up, but stopped at a gesture of Jenks' palm.

"How much will it run me if an accident happens to them? I mean the kind of accident from which it's impossible to recover. Understand?"

"Just how much *can* you pay?" the man asked.

Jenks' chest heaved in silent laughter. "Five thousand."

"You got a deal."

"Here's the set-up then. They always come in to Nogales Friday. Reason, Dave's fish. Next week, they'll have to come in. The lawyer will be here in town with the lease and renewal option. They have until Saturday midnight to get the money. Of course they won't have it. I'm not taking any chances that the small chance they *might* have it will strip the gears of my plan. That's where you come in. *They must not come in Friday*. . . ."

THE two partners, unaware of what was being plotted against them, smiled at each other as Jenks passed from view. It was Muhlbeck who suggested they had better attend to their business while they still had time.

"Where's Dave and the missus?" By Gollis asked the girl as they paid their check.

"Phoenix," the girl said. She was very proud of the fact that Dave and his wife trusted her and her sister so, they let the two girls run the restaurant when they went away. "Visitin' relatives. They always do at this time of the year. Gosh. You and Mister Muhlbeck been around long enough to know that."

The two men looked at each other in bewilderment.

"Sure," Little Rosie continued. "They'll be back next week-end. Saturday morning. . . ."

But the two had turned from her and were almost through the door. Nor did they hear the last of her sentence. "And we'll be closed next Friday. . . ."

"Now that's what I call a life," By Gollis said. "Goin' away any time you feel like it."

"Well, just don't be gettin' big ideas," Muhlbeck said. "Right now all's I hope is Forman's still in. We need ten cases of dynamite and a dozen drill bits."

"Why so much?" By Gollis said as he strove to match footsteps with his shorter partner.

"The sight of that fat pig, Jenks, made me think of that day. We'll pick up the dynamite, caps, fuses and bits and head straight back for the mine. There's a whole week of blowin' we can do. Maybe we was a couple of suckers buyin' that map. Sure, those maps are peddled all over Arizona. But I've mucked enough ore to know silver in pyrites when I see it."

"By Gollis! Now yore talkin'!" By Gollis exclaimed. His long legs and arms were swinging wildly as he walked, and his head swung back and forth between answering his partner and watching the people along the walk. Five days was a long time away from people. In the eight years he had been in Arizona, nothing outside of Tucson and Phoenix reminded him of home, Des Moines. "Stands to reason we're goin' to hit that body. Got to!"

"On'y thing is," Muhlbeck said darkly. "I hope we don't come in to where they were flooded out. If we do, we're sunk."

The animation died in By Gollis' face at the words. Silence descended between them until they reached the junk strewn store of Amos Forman, where all the free-lance leasers bought their equipment. Forman was not only cheap, he also ran a strong bill on credit.

They peered into the windows, lit by a couple of Colman lanterns, and saw Forman sitting in his favorite position just inside the door, rocking away on the spindle-legged chair he had converted to that purpose. Forman saw them at the same instant and waved them in.

HE WAS a short wizened-faced man in his middle sixties. He was also one of the old-timers in Nogales, having come there twenty years before, for reasons of health, and because climate alone doesn't always provide the necessary vitamins for the maintenance of life, went into the business he was in.

"Wasn't expectin' you two till tomorrow," Forman said.

"Wasn't goin' to come in till then, either," By Gollis said. "But we had a change of plan. Forman, we owe you a heap of money. . . ."

"Better'n seven hunert," Forman said. "Why? Gonna pay?"

" . . . and we want some more stuff . . . on the bill," By Gollis said in quiet desperation.

Forman rocked in silence for a few

minutes. When he spoke, it wasn't directly to either of the two:

"Funny thing," he said. "Folks round here say I'm queer. Say I trust a man too far. Say I let them run too big bills for my good. Too many people worry about my good. Can't stop 'em. Just like they can't stop me from giving credit to a couple of fools who come in here with a map some Indian sold 'em, and an idee that there's silver in the Lost Chance. But one of those two was a hard rock mucker in silver down in Nevada. And the other was a horny-palmed farmer from Iowa who came here because he got tired of gossipy women and politician-minded men. I figgered those two made a good combination. So I lent them money and material. Don't stand to reason I should stop now. What you two good-for-nothing idiots want?"

Muhlbeck felt an odd tightness of the throat as he went through the list of what they wanted. Men like Forman were hard to find. Anywhere!

And at that very moment, a hard-faced man in stained Levis and dark shirt, a man whose upper lip projected queerly over his lower, was getting into a dust-covered Ford parked a few doors from Dave's Border Cafe. He patted a pocket before switching on the ignition. There was a sheaf of crisp, new, twenty-dollar bills in his pocket; Jenks had given the down payment on murder. A grim smile lighted his face as, passing Forman's, he saw his victims in the store. But he was in a hurry; there were things in his motel cabin on the edge of town, which had to be put in the car, a brace of .45's, a rifle, and four small bottles of colorless liquid. . . .

Neither By Gollis or his partner were aware of the stranger's passing. Nor of his plans for their future. They were busy checking what Forman was piling up for them along part of one wall.

". . . Well. Guess that does it. How you fellers gonna get it out there's a little beyond me. That flat bed you put on your coupe ain't big enough. . . ."

"We ain't," Muhlbeck said. "We got a load of cut four-by-fours McGampsy got for us from them contractors who got the job ripping down the old army camp up in the hills. But we figgered you could send the stuff in that pick-up truck you got. . . ."

"Yeah. I suppose I could," Forman said. "Tomorrow's Satiday. Be all right. Pedro won't have any morning deliveries. But what you plan on doing?"

By Gollis took the floor then:

"I been figgerin' that we ain't too far off the big ore body. We've blowed almost nine hunert and eighty feet. I got a hunch it can't lay much more than just past the thousand foot mark. The two of us could do twenty feet by Thursday."

Forman shook his head in understanding. He sucked his lips in sharply, and the two men turned questioning glances at him. The sucking inward of his lips always meant Amos Forman had news of importance; it was his way of beginning, like the clearing of a throat:

"By the way, Jenks was in here late this afternoon. Bought about a thousand dollars wuth of stuff from me. Wasn't at all bashful telling me what for. Says he's going to take up your lease when it expires. . . ."

"The dirty belly-crawling bastud!" Muhlbeck said in low level tones. But there was more venom and anger in the way he said the words than if he'd shouted.

" . . . Yep! Says he's thankful you fellers did as much as you did. Paid me cash, too. Brand new twenty-dollar bills. Said he just got them from Tucson. By the way, you boys still using

Grant for your assays?"

"Why, shore," By Gollis said.

"So's Jenks," Forman said pointedly. "Grant'd sell his mother for a bottle of whiskey. Jenks gets the report on the assay before you do."

"God damn him!" This time there was deep feeling in Muhlbeck's voice. "And we brought that skunk a sack of ore this morning when we came in. Say, Amos. Do us a favor."

"Sure."

"We won't be in town for the report. Pick it up for us."

"Glad to. And I'd advise using somebody else. . . ."

"We shore will," By Gollis said. "If we're still around."

They shook hands then with Forman, said good night and left. They wanted an early start for Lost Chance. And for once they passed the motel office, where 'Tonio, who ran the place in Sheriff McGampsy's absence, was sitting deep in a pulp Western. Tonio was Little Rosie's boy friend. And usually the partners stopped by to hear the latest in the two's romance. This night, however, they wanted to get away as quickly as possible. They didn't even stop to say good night as they drove past the office, though the fact that 'Tonio was on the phone might have had something to do with it.

'TONIO'S warm brown eyes followed the tail light of the partners' car until it disappeared around the far part of the driveway. But his mouth remained glued to the mouthpiece of the phone. Little Rosie was at the other end. She had just called, and 'Tonio was waiting until she got the cash from a customer before she resumed her conversation. It must be important, he thought, Rosita never used Spanish unless it was. . . .

"Tonio!" her voice shrilled excitedly. "Are Mister By Gollis and Mister Muhlbeck still there?"

"No. They just left."

"Run out, 'Tonio and see. . . ."

"Too late," the boy said. "Why? "What's the excitement?"

"You've got to, 'Tonio!" her voice demanded. "You've simply got to."

"Don't be crazy," he said. "I'm alone for one thing, and another, I ain't got wings. Now cool down and make sense."

This time a new voice came on the wire. It was a heavier, almost masculine voice:

"Listen! This is Big Rosie. I've got to have a car. Don't ask why. Just have one there for me when I get there."

"But . . ."

"You want to marry my sister?" Big Rosie asked. "I say all right, if I get the car. If not, your beard will be long and grey before I give permission."

And in the background, he could hear Little Rosie's plea, " 'Tonio. Do as she asks. . . ."

"Okay!" he said. He knew what he was planning on doing would mean his job. But for his Rosita. . . . The sheriff always left the keys for his car in the ignition switch. This night, Big Rosie was going to be the law.

He looked at her, his eyes wide and wondering. Big Rosie looked as if she'd run the mile from Dave's to the motel. Sweat stained her dress, and ran in rivulets down the heavy cheeks. Her eyes were wild, staring in bright determination. Even her voice was different, sure, hard, demanding:

"Did they walk to town or drive?"

"They walked. They always do."

She bit hard on her lower lip. That meant the other, the killer Jenks had hired, had a head start. She had been both lucky and unlucky; lucky in that she was in the kitchen at the time Jenks and the other had their talk, and unlucky in that she got a party a few moments later, which took up a full half hour of her time. The little sister didn't want her to leave, but she had to. Dave and his wife would understand. And if they didn't, what matter.

"Get the car, 'Tonio," she said.

It was a late-model Buick. Her eyes lit up as he wheeled it in front of the gas pumps. With this baby she should catch them before they made the turn into the county highway. 'Tonio's jaw hung slack as she poured herself behind the wheel with a grunt.

"Tell the Sheriff I had to do it," she called over her shoulder, as she set the car in gear.

THERE was nothing complex in Big Rosie's make-up. She was a simple woman, and her thinking processes worked accordingly. Therefore she always said and used the direct words and deeds. She had heard the whole of the plot. She knew that the stranger was waiting in his cabin almost directly across the highway, which was the main street in Nogales, for a call from Jenks. Jenks had said he would let him know when the partners left. And Jenks had followed the two from the restauarant. She had sent the Mexican busboy after him. He had run all the way to tell her Jenks had gone into a phone booth in the Chinese grocery on the far corner. And she had guessed, correctly, the reason for the call. Somewhere in those dark hills ahead, a killer was waiting for a rattle-trap Ford coupe.

She was right.

The dust-covered Ford was parked along the shoulder of a sheer-faced hill at the gravel highway intersection. The road sloped downward at this spot for a hundred or so yards before it climbed again. There was a bar placed across the road at this point. It had been placed there for the sole purpose of stopping motorists from racing downhill. For beyond the bar, the road took an abrupt hairpin turn which was blind to the vision. Too many accidents had happened so the state maintenance department had resorted to the simple expedient of the bar, blocking the highway.

The shadowy figure of a man was to be seen squatting on the gravel. He looked up and down the stretch of ground, shook his head in silent satisfaction, and gingerly removed a small bundle of something wrapped in cotton, from his jacket pocket. He placed the bundle on the ground so that any passing car would pass over the bundle. The road was quite narrow and a driver would have to drive almost against the rock-ribbed hill to hit it.

The man got up from his squat and walked back to his car. He got in, drove it past the intersection, and parked in a copse of spruce. Then he got out and under his arm was a high-powered rifle with a telescope mount attached to the barrel. Slung over his shoulder was a pair of night glasses. The killer was ready for his prey. The hilltop directly above the trap he had set, the four bottles of nitro wrapped in cotton for better sighting purposes, would serve as his blind. It took only a short while to climb.

There was a rock balanced on the very peak of the hill. It was wide enough so that he could stretch out on it and see directly below. He adjusted the glasses and directed the lenses toward the ribbon of concrete winding down from Nogales. . . . He knew his prey would be along shortly. He had passed them a few miles out of town. And from their speed he had judged he would be at least twenty minutes up on them. Enough time. . . .

The sheriff's Buick roared into the night. Big Rosie drove in a kind of daze.

Her heavy foot pressed the accelerator almost to the floor. It was thirty miles to where the road forked to the county road. The two men had almost an hour's start. The needle leaped in ten mile jumps, fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety, and still her foot pressed harder. Those miles had to be eaten up quickly. She didn't know why she had to get to them so quickly. She only knew that she just *had* to.

She passed a border patrol car as though it were standing still. Nor did she care that the trooper at the wheel gave her one startled glance and shot his car into high speed. People didn't speed that fast, the trooper thought, unless there was something wrong.

She took curves at ninety miles an hour, the car groaning in protest as she wheeled it high on the super and accelerated even faster as it came down to the straightaway. The miles sped by but not fast enough. Dimly, as from a long distance, she heard the sound of a siren behind her. It meant nothing to her. Then she was around the last curve, a long one, it stretched for almost a half mile. Her mouth opened in a gasp, and reflex made her swerve the wheel to the left, where gravel showed pale against the moonlight. There was a small A model Ford coupe just entering the gravel road.

THE car rode high against the shoulder, then swerved sharply inward, and the tires screeched wildly as the brakes were applied. The sudden braking was just too much for the Buick. It careened, suddenly out of control. And smashed full into the side of the coupe just making the turn. The two cars, locked together like lovers in embrace, smashed hard into the hillside. There was a shower of stones sent high into the air. One of these, quite large in size, came down squarely on the cotton-wrapped nitro.

There was a sound like the crack of doom, and flame lit the scene until for a single instant the whole countryside was alive with light. Then darkness and peace descended, accompanied by the rolling downhill of numerous small rocks which had broken away from the hill on which the killer had lain. The rock and man were both gone. He hadn't figured on the concussion. And it had torn the balance away from the huge boulder. Man and rock had fallen together. He lay on his back at the very edge of the huge crater which the nitro had torn in the road. Blood poured from his nose and mouth. One ear hung by a single thread. Both arms and one leg was broken. But fate was kind and had blessed him with unconsciousness. The pain would come later. . . .

The trooper braked his car to a stop. Both he and his partner shook their heads violently to clear them of the ringing which had come as a climax to the terrible explosion of a few seconds before. They got out of the car, wide-eyed at the scene. They could only see the Buick at first. Then they saw the home-made bed of the Ford coupe. Quickly, they raced to the locked cars.

The steering wheel had been snapped off on the Buick. But they saw the woman who had been driving it was alive, though knocked out. It took both of them to drag her out of the car. Then they turned their attention to the Ford. They shook their heads in bewilderment at how the two men who were in the small and narrow seat did not get killed. But not only were they unharmed, they were cursing wildly and demanding to be gotten out.

It was later, when one of the troopers walked down to see if he could discover the reason for the strange explosion, that the broken body of the hired killer was found.

SHERIFF McGAMPSY scratched his balding head, yawned widely; he had been awakened from a sound sleep by the patrol, and shook sleep from his eyes. Before him stood Big Rosie, her dress torn and stained with oil, grease and dirt. There was a shallow scratch high on her cheek where the blood had dried, lending a rakish appearance to her features. Beside her the two partners leaned wearily against the desk. By Gollis' free arm was around the woman's waist, but whether in protection or love was a matter of opinion. The troopers stood guard at the door. They had come back from the doctor's office where they had brought the badly-hurt man. The doctor had said he would live, but that it would take several days before he would be able to talk coherently.

". . . So that's how you got the car, eh, Rosie?" the sheriff asked.

She shook her head wearily. Her entire body seemed a mass of bruises.

"And you say you heard all this from the kitchen. I mean this talk between Jenks and this man?"

Again the oversized head shook yes.

"Then why didn't you come to me?"

"What difference does it make?" By Gollis suddenly made himself heard. "By gollis! The woman saved our lives. The troopers here say that he had enough nitro planted on the road to blow us sky high. . . ."

"But we don't know if it was for you," McGampsy broke in.

"Then get Jenks down here," Muhlbeck said. He twitched a jaw muscle as pain knotted a leg into a lump of agony.

"Uhn, uhn. The boys here say that this stranger won't be able to talk until tomorrow anyway, 'cording to doc. I guess none of you will skip until then. Matter of fact you all look like you could use sleep and rest. By the way, are any of you hurt?"

"No," Big Rosie said tiredly. "I just want to hit the pillows. . . ."

McGampsy swept his hand outward in sudden dismissal.

"Out, all of you. But be at my office about, oh, say two o'clock tomorrow afternoon."

Muhlbeck nodded at the words and shuffled toward the door. But By Gollis didn't. He turned with a broad grin to Big Rosie, and before the startled eyes of the rest planted a kiss full on her lips.

"That's for tonight. And by gollis, if you want more, I'll be ready and waiting. . . ."

The whole town knew of what had happened by the next morning. And there was quite a crowd outside the sheriff's office when the three, Big Rosie, By Gollis and Muhlbeck, showed up in the company of the sheriff. Jenks was already waiting.

McGampsy didn't waste time on preliminaries.

"Jenks," he said sternly, "Big Rosie accuses you of conspiracy to commit murder. What do you have to say to that?"

Jenks' face turned brick-red, a sure sign of mounting anger.

"She's crazy. Crazy! That's what."

"And is Ripley Howard crazy?" the sheriff asked.

"Wh-what do you mean?" Jenks paled suddenly.

"I just talked to Doc Clover. Howard is conscious. He talked and I got a stenographer down there this morning. Want me to read what he said? Or. . . ."

JENKS' head sank to his chest. He was licked. But only for the present. He had money. Lots of it. He'd hire the best lawyer in the country. He didn't even feel the deputy's hand grip his arm. His mind was busy on his defense all the way to the cell.

"But why," Muhlbeck wanted to know. "The guy's nuts. Just because I hit him once. I don't understand."

"But I do," said a strange voice.

It was Amos Forman. He was standing in the doorway. Beside him was the figure of Grant, the assayist. Forman shoved the other into the room.

"Tell 'em what you told me," he commanded.

Grant's head hung low and the words came stumblingly from him:

"Three weeks ago . . . That's when I came to Jenks. By Gollis and Muhly had brought in their ore samples. I did an assay . . . I couldn't believe my eyes . . ." He looked up, white-faced at the two partners. He licked the dryness from his lips and went on. "Know what you hit up there at Lost Chance?" he asked.

They shook their heads.

"You hit a seam of red mercuric sulphide. Sometimes, especially to those not looking for it, it looks like copper ore. I figured that neither of you recognized it. So I went to Jenks. He told me to keep it quiet, paid me well. He even promised me a share in the mine. You see, he knew you fellas weren't going to be able to make payment on the lease. And he had already got in touch with the lawyer who was coming down. The deal was all set if payment was defaulted. . . ."

"But payment won't be defaulted," Forman said quietly. "Because I'm going to lend the boys all the money they need."

"By gollis!" Burris breathed. "Effen Jenks hadn't wanted us out of the way so bad, we'd never have known. I guess providence looks after fools. . . ."

"Fust time Big Rosie's ever been called that," Forman commented drily. "Though her heart's big enough for all providence."

By Gollis whirled and stepped to her side. His arm went around her waist again. Broad grins lighted the faces of those watching as he kissed her again. He bent his head and whispered something to her. She smiled and nodded her head. Then By Gollis turned to the others and said:

"She said, yes. By gollis! She's goin' to marry me. An' what's more, she says I can have *gefilte* fish anytime I want. Missus Dave showed her how to make it."

Rosie's words were drowned in the clamor of congratulations which descended on them, "Only on Friday, though, sweetheart. . . ."

ARGENTINE COWBOY

★ **by Jon Barry** ★

THERE is an amazing similarity between the cowboy of our own Western states and the cowboy of the Argentine pampas. As the vast herds of beef on the hoof on the plains of the west required the control of rough-riding, tough-fighting men, so the same conditions applied to the broad acreage of the pampas. When the same sort of problem is forced to the attention of two widely scattered areas in the world, it is astounding how similar the answers to that problem can be.

The gaucho, whose song has been made famous in this country as well as in the Argentine, is the exact equivalent of our own cowboy. He may not speak the same language, he may ride a little differently, his costume may be considerably more colorful, he may not use a sixgun, and he may prefer the bolo to the lariat, but nevertheless he's the same kind of man. He hungers for the wide open spaces of the pampas, he rides hard and skillfully and he can handle a herd of stampeding cattle destined for the stockyards at Buenos Aires just as easily as his northern counterpart handles cattle bound for the Middle West stockyards.

While the settlement of the pampas of the Argentine didn't follow the same pattern as the settlement of our western towns, the gauchos can tell of some experiences that are as hair-curling as anything the tales of Wild Bill could provide.

Arturo Seguillidar, an Argentine writer, has made a study of pampas life, and has written a history of the development of the pampas gaucho starting as far back as eighteen eighty. On the northern rim of the Argentine, he found that at that time, the gaucho had to battle against the rugged tough Indians much as our own cowboys had to do. The story of the settlement of Con Amana, a badly treated little town, is fascinating.

Con Amana was a town just on the border of northern Argentina. It was bounded on the north by the ever-encroaching jungle and on the south by the broad empty plains of the pampas.

Con Amana served as a recreation center (if the term can be used) for the cowboys—the gauchos—coming in from the surrounding estates of the cattle-raisers for their periodic good time.

But the town was constantly subjected to terrific raids by small bands of primitive Indians, who were armed mostly with the blow-gun and crude wooden swords. It might be thought that they wouldn't be able to offer much trouble to the tough gaucho armed with a repeating rifle imported from the States. The contrary was true for the simple reason that the Indian was a master of guile. He never attacked directly, but always engaged in ambushes, sweeping down and overwhelming small parties of men emerging from the town, before they could organize effective resistance. On occasion, they would make raids on the town proper, swooping in at night and leaving a toll of dead and dying.

Eventually hunting parties were organized. These were made up of gauchos and a few friendly Indians and they spent their time trying to track down any of the guerrilla fighters that they could. The tactic was fairly effective.

Very often the gauchos would fight pitched hand to hand battle with the Indians, in which strength and skill with long knife or a machette would play a more important part than gunfire.

Gradually as the Argentine became more developed and the Indians were, to a certain extent, civilized, these activities died out and life on the great ranchos and estancias became much the same as our own. In the modern Argentine pampas, the gaucho works as hard as he ever did, often in the saddle for days at a time wearing out the horses right from under him when a particularly important cattle drive is on.

But his life now contains more of song and pleasure, although, it is probably more romanticized by the movies and by popular songs than it really deserves.

Men who provide beef cattle for market do not lead quite the romantic and glamorous lives they are usually depicted as doing. Ask any gaucho who will gladly tell you the meaning of hard work. Our own cowboys know that and it's a far cry from the dudes who do rodeo work as compared with the real McCoy.

The cattle ranchos of the Argentine nevertheless have celebrations similar to our rodeos where horsemanship and skill with the bolo is admired. These are usually week-long affairs ending in a blaze of exciting partying. A gaucho ends up with a head like a balloon after too much of the powerful beverages brewed from his native herbs.

* * *

BILLY OVERSTREET

★ by William Karney ★

THE name of Billy Overstreet has not been celebrated very much or for a very long time, but for a brief while he created quite a stir in the Cheyenne of the nineties.

He was a fifteen year old orphan who worked in a saloon doing the odd chores around the place. All the filthy and dirty work was shoved on him and he took it for a long time, never having known anything better.

At the time, the local bad man was a gambler by the name of Kern Whittaker, an Easterner, who had learned a fast draw —both in poker and with a gun. He was a small man, but because of his size he was extremely sensitive. He was also a dandy. Accidentally one day, Billy ran into him with a bucket of slops which he spilled all over the gambler. In a furious rage the man slapped the boy's face and kicked and beat him severely. Billy said nothing. He went into the backroom, and came out a moment later with a gun. He laid the six-gun on the table.

Everyone was startled when he suddenly shouted, "All right, Kern, draw!" The gambler whirled; his eyes narrowed when he saw the gun on the table. He drew. But he wasn't fast enough. The raw kid pumped two forty-five bullets into his chest while his gun was still in his hand. Calmly the boy put down the gun and went back to his chores.

The town was astounded but pleased and no attempt was made to prosecute him. In fact, for a day, he was a hero. Eventually, the boy became an ordinary cowhand and he and his fame drifted from sight and hearing. Billy Overstreet was no coward!

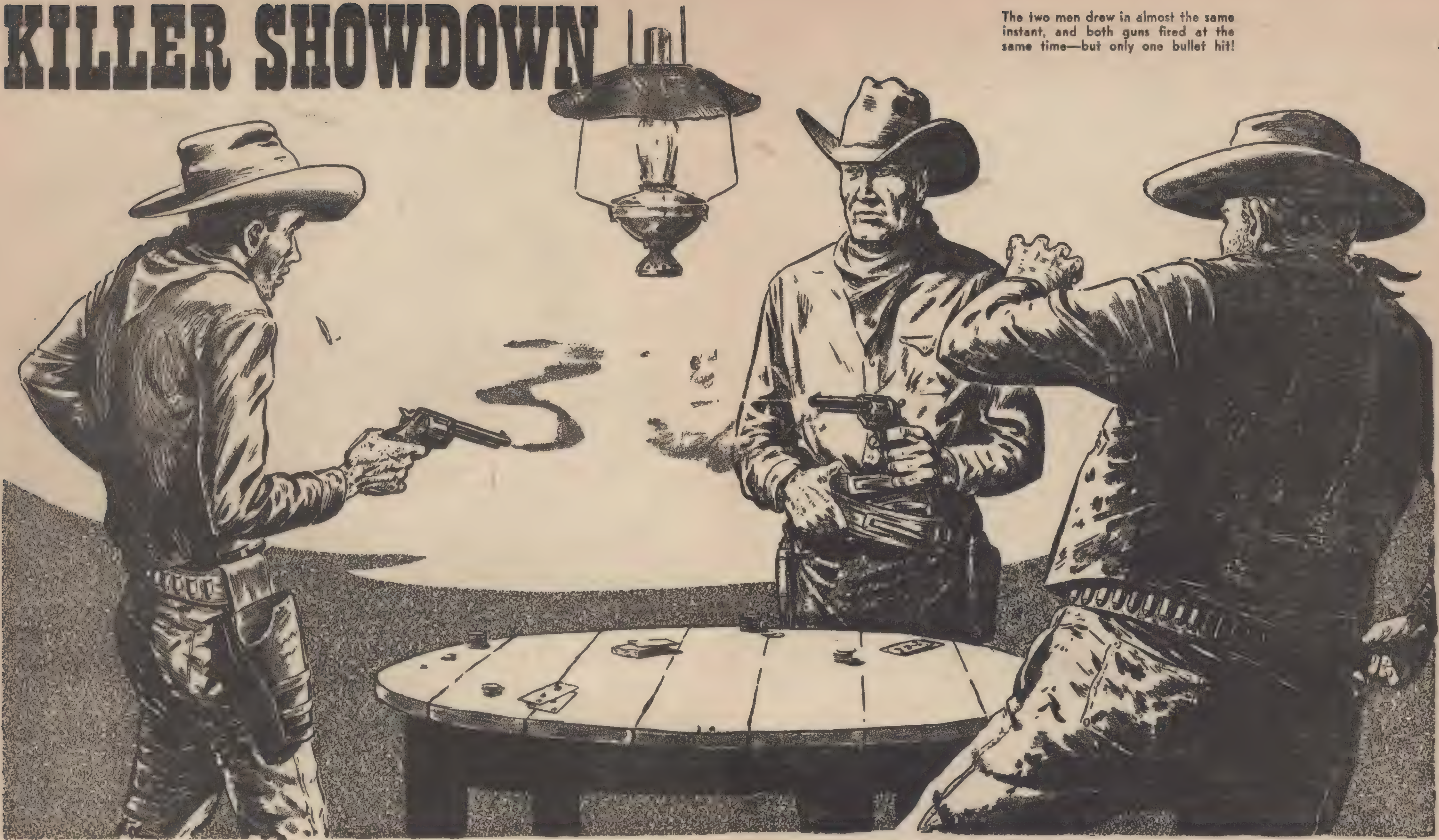
KILLER SHOWDOWN

By H. B. Hickey

NICKNAMES are strange things, but probably the strangest thing about them is that they are so aptly applied. This fellow had a name which made no sense at all unless you knew it came from a certain saying he often quoted:

"To be done right a thing must be done twice, once in your head and once with your hands. Then it's done

KILLER SHOWDOWN



The two men drew in almost the same instant, and both guns fired at the same time—but only one bullet hit!

By H. B. Hickey

If you're going to interrupt a killer at his card game—back up your hand with a gun!

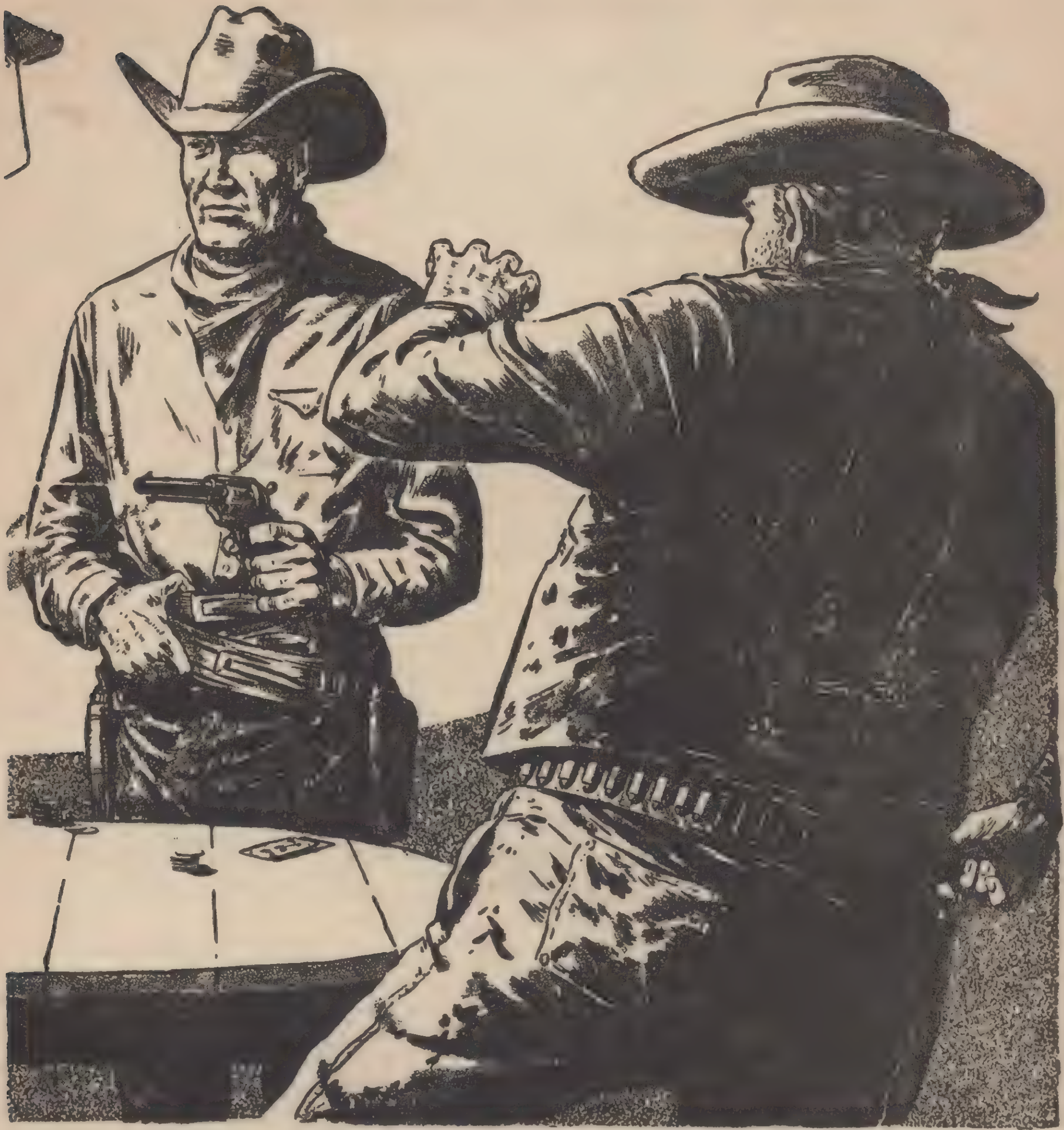
NICKNAMES are strange things, but probably the strangest thing about them is that they are so aptly applied. This fellow had a name which made no sense at all unless you knew it came from a certain saying he often quoted:

"To be done right a thing must be done twice, once in your head and once with your hands. Then it's done and done."

Therefore he was called Dun-Dun. His last name was Evers.

Once, when he had just finished quoting himself with special emphasis, pounding his fist twice into his palm for added effect, someone had been heard to whisper behind his hand that Dun-Dun was living proof that God did not go according to man's rules.

The two men drew in almost the same instant, and both guns fired at the same time—but only one bullet hit!



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When Dun-Dun had finished talking to the two nesters and had gone down the dusty trail in the direction they had indicated, they stood staring at each other for a full minute. Slowly the lines of tiredness faded from their gaunt faces. Then they began to laugh. They could hardly be blamed, for if ever a pair of creatures had been put together without consideration for the principles of symmetry and beauty it was Dun-Dun Evers and his horse.

The horse had the long body of an Arabian and the short legs of a mustang. It was dappled in the forequarters and a solid, gunmetal gray in the rear. Its tail started out to be sparse and then changed its mind and ended with an amazing brush that was pure white.

Dun-Dun too looked as though he had been fashioned from a pile of assorted parts. His arms were long and his trunk short. His shoulders sloped so sharply that he seemed thicker through his deep chest than he was wide. His short legs were bowed to an unbelievable degree. His nose was wide across the bridge, yet managed to turn up at the tip. Across the fair skin on his homely face freckles were scattered in clumps. And the whole jumble was topped by carrot red hair which was never combed and always peeked out from under his enormous black Stetson.

His eyes were small, black, and full of good humor.

"Git along, Terrence," Dun-Dun clucked. "We're almost there." His voice was high pitched but remarkably fresh for a man who had traveled several hundred miles in a few days.

The horse followed the pull of the reins and swung off the dusty road. They went across a rolling field and past a pair of cottonwoods the two nesters had pointed out. While Terrence swam easily across a small creek, Dun-Dun hummed his own off-key version of a mournful trail song.

He let Terrence have his lead while he surveyed the country around him. The land seemed rich and green and good for grazing. Here and there a fence post stood to testify that someone had tried to fence the range. But there was no wire up.

A cow trail cut across the range for a stretch and Dun-Dun followed that. Then they hit another dusty trail and went along that for a while and then over a knoll and they were there.

He sat for a moment and looked at the yard and at the house. Especially at the house. It was a gray, weather-beaten shack which leaned to one side. The porch had given up the struggle against the law of gravity and was almost level with the yard. A single window blinked dustily in the late afternoon sun.

Against this picture was another, in the back of his mind; a picture of a ranch-house set in the heart of fertile grazing land, and reflecting in its spaciousness and solidity the richness of that land. It was the house Dun-Dun lived in. It made quite a contrast with this dismal thing.

DUN-DUN shrugged and dismounted. He walked slowly forward and stepped up onto the porch. He knocked once on the sagging door, then knocked again when there was no reply.

"Who is it?" a woman's voice asked fearfully.

Without answering Dun-Dun pushed open the door and stepped in. His eyes had to cover most of the dim room and its poor furnishings before he saw the woman huddled in the chair against the back wall. She was holding a child tight to her breast.

"Hello, Myrtle," Dun-Dun said quietly.

Her eyes opened wide and then she started to cry. Dun-Dun waited until she was through.

"I got your letter," he added. "Didn't you think I'd come?"

"I didn't know," the woman said dully. "Bob always said you and your pa would never forgive him."

"He should of known better. Pa and I were sore when he up and left like that. But we got over it quick. If Bob wanted to leave a thrivin' ranch and go out nestin' that was his affair."

"If he'd known that I think he would have died happy," Myrtle said.

She started to cry again and Dun-Dun stopped her.

"You better get your things together, Myrtle. Your letter come at our busiest time and we're short handed back home. I got to get back in a hurry."

"You mean you want to take us home with you?" she asked incredulously.

"Hell," Dun-Dun said, "Bob was my brother. You didn't think I was goin' to come up here to give you a couple of bucks and a pat on the back and then go back alone, did you? You're his wife and this is his kid. You're both coming back to live with us and take your rightful share. Now don't make me waste any more time. Pa will be raisin' the roof."

Dun-Dun watched her as she gathered her few belongings together and tossed them into a carpetbag. All the child's things went in first. Then came a few tattered things of her own. He almost told her to leave those out but decided to hold his peace. She might have taken it as a dig at Bob.

He was doubly glad he had not spoken when he saw the last article to go in the bag. It was a vest which had belonged to Bob. Myrtle held it close to her for a moment and Dun-Dun saw her rock back and forth in silent grief.

"Bob always wore this," she whispered brokenly.

"Yeah. I know."

He was remembering his brother Bob as he had seen him last. Bob had been the handsome one in the Evers family, tall and straight and always ready to laugh. Looking about the poor shack Dun-Dun knew that Bob must have changed a great deal.

"Just what did happen?" Dun-Dun asked suddenly. "Your letter was kinda vague. All it said was that Bob was dead. It didn't say how he died."

She whirled on him and the bitter words came forth in a torrent. Dun-Dun knew Myrtle must have been keeping it penned up inside her for a long time.

"How does a nester die? Like a rotten, lousy dog! He lives like one and he dies like one. The big ranchers pull down your fences and run off your cattle and hound you until you go crazy. But Bob wouldn't take that. He couldn't stand to see us ground down slowly."

"So?" Dun-Dun said quietly.

"So he did what any man with gumption would do. He buckled on his gun and went into town to have it out. And they brought him back to me on a board."

SHE was rocking back and forth with Bob's vest held tight against her and whimpering his name over and over.

"They killed him?" Dun-Dun asked slowly.

Her mouth worked. "Self-defense, they said. He was shot through the chest and they said he drew first. Everything nice and legal. But the man who shot Bob is a hired killer. He put Bob in a spot where he had to go for his gun even though he knew he was bound to be beat."

"I had no idea," Dun-Dun said mildly. His face grew quiet with thought, and the only sign of emotion was the way his teeth clamped tightly on his sucked-in lips.

"You've never heard of such things, I suppose?" she asked.

He let her anger and bitterness ride over him. She had to get it off her chest, that was all.

"Some men die naturally," he observed.

"Not when they're nesters."

She sagged suddenly, and Dun-Dun thought she might collapse, but in a moment she had straightened again and was running a rope around the carpetbag. He watched her in silence, with narrowed eyes.

"That changes things," he said at last. "What did you say that killer's name is?"

"I didn't say. Because it doesn't matter. He was only the man who pulled the trigger. The man who hired him is the real killer."

"And who," Dun-Dun asked, "might that be?"

She shrugged hopelessly. "Any one of three or four of the big ranchers around here. They're all set against us."

"I'd still like to know that gunman's name," Dun-Dun reminded her.

"Al Basel," Myrtle said dully.

"I reckon I won't have any trouble finding him," Dun-Dun said. "You just set that bag down and wait till I get back."

There was a lamp on the table and Myrtle went over and struck a match and lit it. Dun-Dun saw that her hands were shaking. In the yellow light fresh lines of anxiety appeared on her thin face.

He dug into his pocket as he came toward the table. His hand reappeared with a roll of bills. Only a few went back in his pocket. The rest he handed to Myrtle.

From another pocket he extracted a stub of a pencil and a bit of wrinkled paper. Pressing his left palm on the table for support, he bent down and laboriously scribbled a note.

"This here's to pa. I'm allowin' myself only two hours. If I'm not back by then you and the kid better go ahead. And tell pa I wasn't meanin' to leave him in the lurch but I couldn't rightly see my way to go back without tryin' to settle up for Bob."

HE RODE slowly for a man who was in a hurry. Picking his way across the range toward town Dun-Dun sat hunched in the saddle, his brows knit in thought. A full moon, freshly risen, lit his way so that he was free to concentrate on his problem.

Certainly he had not given himself much time. But that was all the time there was. In two hours he had to seek out a man who had every reason to hide his identity. He had to find a way to flush him from cover and bring him into the open.

There was no time for caution, no time to work carefully. There could be no wasted motion. Whatever plan he adopted would have to be direct. Also dangerous.

Suddenly Dun-Dun nodded sharply. He had it now. Direct and to the point.

All the way to town his mind worked on the plan. From the little Myrtle had told him he knew he would be up against cautious men who preferred to work slowly. But they could also be prodded into action. Bob had proved that.

By the time he turned down the main street of the town he had every move he would make and every word he would speak clearly etched in his mind.

Dark store fronts lined the street on both sides and threw long shadows across it. Further down there was a glow which came from the saloon and showed the row of horses hitched to the rail before it. Dun-Dun headed for that.

Dismounting, he made space for Terrence at the end of the row and threw a quick loop over the rail. His hard heels thudded across a board walk and then he was flinging wide the batwing doors.

He watched the eyes turn toward him and saw a glint of amusement appear in some of them. More than one smiled broadly, not even troubling to hide the smile. The place was crowded with men drinking, gambling and talking.

Fully half of the men were nesters. Dun-Dun saw the two who had given him directions on the trail. They were huddled at the far end of the long bar with a group of others who were dressed as poorly as they. Not one of them, Dun-Dun saw, was armed.

It was to the others, the prosperous-looking men, that he gave his attention. They stood and sat relaxed, their faces free of fear. None of these was afraid to carry a gun, none afraid that the gun he wore would be an invitation to trouble.

Dun-Dun was aware of the weight of his own two guns as they slapped against his thighs. His rolling gait carried him down to the middle of the bar and then he turned inward and shouldered himself between two ranchers.

"Whiskey!" he called.

His rough action had brought down a sudden silence in which his voice sounded high and squeaky. Behind him someone laughed. Dun-Dun kept his eyes on the bartender.

"I said I wanted whiskey!" he yelled.

He threw a bill on the bar and waited until his drink was set before him. When he had tossed it down he coughed violently, pounded on the bar, and felt the men on either side move away. By now all conversation in the big smoky room had ceased. As Dun-Dun turned he saw that the men at the poker table had laid down their cards and were watching him.

He pushed back his big hat so that more of his hair showed. The bar came barely below the level of his shoulders and he had to raise his elbows high as he leaned back. The men near him stepped away from the bar and by doing so saved him the trouble of turning his head in order to watch them.

And then his voice was cutting through the silence.

"If there's any of you want to laugh you better do it now because I don't like interruptions. And if there's any of you want to know who's talkin' I'll tell you. The name is Evers; *Dun-Dun* Evers."

HIS eyes swept the room. Most of the men looked amused, others interested. But all of them, without exception, started slightly at the sound of his name. And before they could stop themselves their eyes swivelled toward one of the tables.

There were four men at that table. One of them blinked and set up a little straighter. His elbow nudged the man next to him and then was knocked away. Dun-Dun caught the glance which flew among the four. But he kept talking.

"I reckon all of you knew my brother Bob. But you don't know me. Well, I'm goin' to tell you all about me so you'll know. You want to know why they call me Dun-Dun? It's because when I do a job it's done and done right.

"I'm here because my brother Bob was murdered. And I'm goin' to stay right here until I get the ones who done it!"

With dramatic suddenness his voice cut off. His forefinger pointed to a spot on the furthest wall. He watched the eyes in the room swing to the spot on the farthest wall. He watched.

"And here's my best reference," Dun-Dun said.

His right hand darted down and slapped leather. Out of its holster the gun glinted as the barrel swung up. Then the room was filled with acrid gun smoke and the sound of the shot. There was a hole in the wall a few inches from the spot.

While he slid the gun back into its holster Dun-Dun watched the four men at the table. They had relaxed visibly. His shooting had been fairly accurate and his draw had been faster than most, but they didn't seem worried.

Out of all the men in the big room Dun-Dun had picked these four. Nor had he done it without reason. While others had been amused these men had been interested. From the moment they had heard his name they had been watching him and weighing him.

Two of the men seemed liked ordinary cowpunchers. They had scarred faces and watchful eyes. Somehow they did not seem like gunfighters. Too big, maybe.

The other two interested Dun-Dun more. One was quite young. He wore a cream-colored hat and his kerchief was carefully knotted about his throat. His ice blue shirt matched his eyes almost exactly, and it was his eyes that told what he was. He was smiling faintly.

The second man was older, taller and heavier. His hat was dark and expensive and sat squarely on his head above an angular, careful face. With deft fingers he rolled a cigarette and as he raised it to his lips Dun-Dun saw him speak from the side of his mouth.

Two heads nodded almost imperceptibly and then both cowpunchers were pushing their chairs back as they rose. Dun-Dun swung his eyes away.

"I reckon you know all about me now," he said to the room at large. "But if you want to know any more I'll be back as soon as this place airs out."

He was moving away from the bar even as he spoke. Things were breaking faster than he had expected. Before the two men had left their table Dun-Dun was at the swinging doors. He heard their footsteps start after him.

On the board walk he swung to the right and headed down the street. By the time the batwing doors thudded open again he was three stores down and moving as fast as he could without seeming to be in a rush.

The urge to turn and see whether they were behind him was almost irresistible but Dun-Dun put it down. That would give his play away. He had to take his chances.

HIS break came soon. It came in the shape of a yawning space between two of the buildings which fronted the street. As he approached the opening Dun-Dun saw that it lay in deep shadows.

For an instant he hesitated, then he turned off the walk and into the dark passage. But only a few steps and he stopped, his back frozen against the wall of the building, his guns in his hands.

The wait was short. He heard the quickened clumping of feet on the walk and then a whisper reached his ears. A moment later the two men had turned the corner and were starting down the dark passage.

"Reach," said Dun-Dun.

They stopped as though they had run into a wall. The man on the left fell back a half step and Dun-Dun tightened his finger on the trigger. But it was only surprise; the other made no move for his gun.

"Kinda foxy, ain't I?" Dun-Dun grinned.

"We don't know what you're talkin' about," one of the big men said.

"Of course not. Which one of you is Al Basel?"

"Neither one," the big man said. His breath came out in a long whisper which was like a sigh of relief.

"Just the way I figured," Dun-Dun told them cheerfully. "I had a hunch they'd think the ordinary help was good enough."

His tone sharpened suddenly and he poked his guns forward.

"Turn around. Both of you. And get your faces smack up against that wall. Your hands too."

He watched them carefully until they had assumed exactly the position he wanted. Only then did he holster one of his guns. With his free hand he lifted their weapons and threw them far down the passage. Then he stepped back and let them turn around.

"Now what do you want?" the man on the right said.

"The name of the man who paid Al Basel to kill my brother Bob."

"Why don't you ask Al Basel?" the big man snorted.

"Because he wouldn't answer. He'd try to outdraw me and one of us would get killed and I might never find out."

"Pretty slick, ain't you?"

"Sometimes," Dun-Dun admitted amiably.

"Not this time," the big man sneered. "Because we don't know. And if we did know we wouldn't tell any quicker than Al Basel."

"That's where you're wrong," Dun-Dun told him. "I'm goin' to start counting. And if I don't get an answer by the time I hit 10 these guns are goin' off."

"You're not scarin' anyone. Two dead men still won't get you what you want to know."

Dun-Dun stared at him bleakly. It was going to take more time than he had wanted to spend.

"Turn around again," he ordered.

Dun-Dun had been standing almost between them. Now, as they moved sluggishly to obey his command, he stepped to the left and then forward. The gun in his right hand came up in a swift arc, landing just below the big man's right ear. Without a sound the man crumpled.

THE man still standing had started to turn and then stopped as Dun-Dun swung the gun in his direction. But Dun-Dun had no intention of shooting. He was sliding the gun back into his holster!

"I'll be damned!" his opponent swore. There was amazed pleasure in his tone.

He completed his turn and came around facing Dun-Dun. His hand dipped toward his holster and then stopped. He had forgotten the holster was empty.

"You'll be worse than that," Dun-Dun muttered as he stepped in.

His fist shot out to splat against the big man's jaw and drive him back against the wall of the shack. But the blow had not been too hard. There was a confident grin on the other's face as he bounced off the wall and charged Dun-Dun.

An arm as thick as a grizzly's swung toward Dun-Dun's head. At the last possible instant that head moved aside and the arm swished through empty air. There was a grunt as Dun-Dun chopped a short punch to his opponent's belly.

Before the big man could straighten Dun-Dun hit him again, this time squarely in the mouth. Another punch cracked against his head and still another brought blood from his nostrils. Not one of Dun-Dun's punches was hard enough to knock the man out, yet each was sharp, vicious and painful.

Again the big man hit the wall. This time he was a little slower in coming away from it. He held his arms straight out before him. His intention was obvious. It was to use his superior weight and strength to crush his smaller opponent.

But Dun-Dun was not waiting to be crushed. As he stepped forward his own long arm shot out in a straight jab that caught the big man on his already bleeding nose and drove his head back. The head came down and was jolted back again.

"Did I hear you say you wanted to tell me something?" Dun-Dun asked.

"Go to hell," came the gasped reply.

The answer to that was a blow to the side of the neck which brought a moan of pain from the larger man. There were more moans as Dun-Dun chopped short punches above the kidneys. The big man wavered and started to topple and Dun-Dun hit him twice in the solar plexus.

It was all the punishment he could take. His knees buckled and he fell. Dun-Dun stood over him, watching him gasp for breath.

"Did you say something?" Dun-Dun asked again.

Doggedly the big man shook his head. Dun-Dun reached down and grabbed a handful of hair and hauled the other to his feet. He was limp as a dead calf.

"I can stand this as long as you can," Dun-Dun told him. His open palm swung back and forth against the other's face. In vain the man tried to shield himself. Dun-Dun's hand brushed his arm aside. He began to wonder how much his opponent coul take.

Not much, it turned out.

"Enough." The word was barely audible as it came through torn and swollen lips.

"Start talking," Dun-Dun said tensely.

THE boards under Dun-Dun's feet clattered as he walked back toward the saloon. Both his would-be attackers lay unconscious in the dark passage.

He hesitated for a moment before stepping through the doors. Beyond them and above them he could see the blue haze of smoke. The hum of conversation was loud. Taking a last deep breath, Dun-Dun moved forward.

All heads swivelled toward him and he grinned as he saw surprise on more than one face. But he was interested only in the two men sitting at a table near the end of the bar. Men fell away as he moved in that direction.

The young fellow in the ice blue shirt was still smiling faintly, his eyes as cool as before. His companion watched Dun-Dun gravely. Both men kept their hands on the table. Their only move was to slide their chairs a little farther apart.

Dun-Dun came on slowly until he was about ten feet from the table. His dark eyes went first to the younger man.

"You're Al Basel?" At Al Basel's cool nod he went on: "You killed my brother Bob."

"He drew on me," Basel said. His voice was utterly emotionless. "That right, Farnum?"

"That's right," his companion said flatly. "He went for his gun and Al had to plug him."

Dun-Dun talked through bared teeth. "That's not the way one of your boys just told it to me, Farnum."

"So?"

"Just so. The way he told it you and Basel had it all fixed up. You forced Bob into an argument and you used some pretty hard talk. You were standing just behind and to one side of Basel. You made a move like you might be going for your gun. It was only a fake.

"But Bob didn't know that. When he saw your hand drop he went for his gun. That's when Basel plugged him. To everybody else it looked like it was just between the two of them."

Farnum and Basel were both rising from their chairs, their hands still held carefully on the table top, furnishing not the slightest excuse for Dun-Dun to draw his gun.

"That's the craziest story I ever heard," Farnum said as he came erect. "There ain't a judge would believe it."

"I believe it," Dun-Dun said. "And I got a witness."

"My own man?" Farnum smiled mockingly.

That was just the point, Dun-Dun knew. It was one thing to beat a man into submission. It would be quite another to keep that man from changing his story in a courtroom.

What was enough evidence for Dun-Dun would not be enough for a judge. And if he took the law into his own hands *he* would be considered a murderer!

Farnum and Al Basel knew that too, and they were giving him no opening. Their hands were kept carefully away from their guns, their eyes stayed fixed on his own hands. Slowly they were drifting further apart, ready for any move Dun-Dun might make and yet giving him no excuse for making it.

"Think you've got me sewed up, don't you?" Dun-Dun asked. "Well, you're wrong. I thought I told you all about me."

"You told us," Farnum said. "And you showed us too."

THERE was a flurry of laughter through the room. Dun-Dun's face reddened and he lifted his right hand and ran it under his hat and through his hair. Basel and Farnum were watching that hand like hawks.

"You showed us, Evers," Basel said in his emotionless voice. "And you ain't good enough. You hear that? Don't try anything because you ain't good enough."

His words were like a slap in the face and the only sound in the big room was the scraping of chairs as men fell back out of range. It was up to Dun-Dun now. He could either back down or go for his gun.

His right hand was still fixed in his hair. Basel and Farnum were watching that hand. It had a long way to drop to reach the holster on Dun-Dun's thigh.

He let the hand drop. Only as far as his belt. And then his thumb caught in the belt and stopped.

But Basel and Farnum were not waiting. Farnum was slow but the gunman was greased lightning on his draw. With a single smooth and flowing motion his gun was out of the holster and swinging up.

Dun-Dun's first shot caught him squarely in the chest and flung him backward. His own bullet went into the ceiling. There was a glaze on the cold blue eyes before he hit the floor.

Farnum fired wildly and the bullet lifted Dun-Dun's hat from his head. Then Dun-Dun's finger tightened and the room was filled with the blast of his gun. An invisible hand seemed to hit Farnum's stomach and he doubled over and went slowly to his knees and then pitched forward onto his face.

Slowly Dun-Dun took his eyes off Farnum and looked down at the gun in his own hand. He wore an air almost of astonishment when his eyes lifted to sweep the room.

"You all saw that," Dun-Dun said. "I had my thumb in my belt and they drew on me."

His tone changed to one of mockery. "They thought it took two men to work that trick. One man can do it if he's good enough. They should have known I was good enough. I told them all about myself, didn't I?" He spoke in a tone of outraged innocence.

There was no answer. Neither was there any laughter. Only Dun-Dun was smiling.

"Of course I left out one thing," he said as he walked toward the swinging doors. "I didn't tell them I was left handed."

THE END

EARLY CALIFORNIAN LAND GRANTS

★ by Walter Lathrop ★

THE private land grant system was introduced into California in 1784 during the administration of Governor Fages. Because of the lack of responsible petitioners, the Spanish governors that followed Fages added less than twenty grants to the three initial concessions.

Mexico tried to encourage the settlement of her frontier provinces by the liberal Colonization Act of 1824. This law furnished the legal pattern for all subsequent land grants in the border provinces and established a principle in Mexican law which remained in force down to the enactment of the Constitution of 1917. Mexican law fixed the minimum land grant at one square league or about four thousand five hundred acres. Eleven square leagues was the maximum limit, and it did not restrict the amount of land a rancher might acquire by gift, purchase or bequest. Between 1834 and 1946 Mexican governors granted at least seven hundred private land grants to ranchers. So when the United States acquired California, most of the desirable land west of the Coast Range Mountains was in the hands of private owners.

In applying for a land grant under Mexican law, the petitioner stated that he was a native-born or naturalized citizen, set forth boundaries, approximate size, and identifying landmarks of the desired tract. He testified that none of the land in question had previously been included in any other concession; proved that he was able to stock the land with a number of cattle and horses; supplied a rough topographical map of the property which showed the hills and waterways, marshes, wastelands, and other landmarks.

The surveying was carried out under the supervision of a magistrate, assisting witnesses, and neighboring ranchers. Surveyors mounted on horseback measured the boundaries of the grant. They used a long rawhide cord on the ends of which were attached stakes which the riders pushed into the ground as they rode along. After the land was surveyed, then followed the ceremony when the new owner took possession of his grant. The grantee walked over his land, pulled out grass, scattered handfuls of earth, broke off branches of trees, and performed other acts of possession.

Surveys made in such a haphazard method proved to be the source of much controversy. Corner posts on a grant were often marked with the owner's branding iron; but most often the most convenient object—a steer's skull in a clump of bushes, a group of cactus, a notch on a tree-trunk, the crossing of two trails, a brush pile, or a spring—were used to designate boundary marks. As time went by, many of these land-marks disappeared and this put the land title office in confusion. Even now a few of the boundary lines are occasionally before the courts. In order to make a grant valid, it was necessary to fulfill certain conditions, such as building a house, and stocking the land with cattle, and planting trees on the line. If these requirements were not met, the grant could legally be anulled and the land open again for a petitioner.

WELLS FARGO POET

★ by Marty Mesner ★

CHARLES BOLES, better known as Black Bart, was one of the most successful robbers that ever operated along the Mother Lode. He followed his career for eight years, and pulled thirty robberies without firing a shot. The reason for his success was that he worked alone and told no one his business, and planned each crime from beginning to end.

He started his career by accident. He was a well-educated, middle-aged man of dignified appearance. He had been a Union officer in the Civil War and had later become a teacher in the Northern Mines. He loved to play a practical joke and that is what started his life of crime.

One day as he was riding along the road from school, he heard the stage coming toward him. He knew the stage driver and thought it would be fun to scare him a bit. So he broke a branch off a bush about the size and shape of a pistol, and tied his handkerchief over his face. When the stage came alongside him, he jumped out of the bushes and told the driver to "hands up"! The driver looked so frightened that Boles thought he would carry the joke along, so he ordered him to throw out the box. The driver hauled out the old Wells Fargo wooden box and tossed it on the ground. It broke open and the treasure was at his feet. The driver cracked the whip and the stage was off.

Boles hadn't meant for the joke to go so far. The sight of all that gold bullion and the sacks of gold dust was too much of a temptation for him to resist. He decided that if he could make as much in two minutes of practical joking as he could teaching school for two years, he should give up school and make his jokes pay off. So he put the treasure in his saddle bags and went to San Francisco. He registered in a small hotel as Mr. Bolton, a mining man who had to leave town occasionally to inspect his mines. All the mining he did on these trips was in the Wells Fargo boxes. He would go into a small mining town and hang around till he'd find out when a large shipment would be coming in, then he would lay in wait for the stage miles away. He'd have his get-away planned as carefully as the hold-up. He carried a real gun then but he never fired a shot or robbed passengers. He would just take the gold from the box and leave a poem in it. The verses were written to fit the occasion and were signed Black Bart, Po8. That was his corney pun for poet.

These robberies went on for years in widely separated places. Each time he'd come back to his hotel in Frisco and say that one of his mines had come into a new pocket. He was such a respectable old fellow in his dress and manners that no one would ever suspect him. He quite often had lunch with detectives from the Hall of Justice and they would all have quite a laugh about the stupid county sheriffs that could never catch this robber poet. The best joke of all was that it took a fifteen year old boy to bring his career to a temporary halt. The boy was hunting squirrel near by when he saw Black Bart running from the stage with the bags of gold. He was able to fire one shot just before Bart was out of sight. He noticed that the bandit dropped his tools and held his wrist for a moment, then he grabbed up his bags in the other hand and kept on running. The boy and the driver went over his tracks and found his tools, derby hat, and a starched cuff with blood stains on it. Also on the cuff was a San Francisco laundry mark which finally led them to Mr. Bolton. When he was shown the evidence against him together with the fresh scar on his wrist, he admitted his crimes. He got off with only six years in San Quentin, and driving the stage was a rather quiet job during that time. As soon as he was released a lone robber began popping up again just when the boxes would be the heaviest. This robber was heavily disguised and didn't leave verses in the empty boxes, but the Wells Fargo detectives knew by the style of the jobs that it was old Black Bart operating again. So they found Bart and made a deal with him. The Wells Fargo agency agreed to pay Bart two hundred dollars a month if he wouldn't rob them any more. Bart said he was getting pretty old and would be glad to retire and live on the monthly pension. So Black Bart's practical joke carried through to the end, and he had the last laugh on Wells Fargo after all.

The Thespian of Woods Creek

By W. T. Ballard

Woods Creek had never boasted a famous actress as its guest until Judy Colston came to town—but it did have a man who knew his Hamlet

AT FOURTEEN my ambition was to be an auctioneer, to wear a flowered waistcoat with a heavy nugget chain, and be able to talk as rapidly and convincingly as Tom Bannerman.

Tom was not much over twenty-one, but he had been a second mate on a sailing vessel, and many an evening he entertained us at the print shop with his stirring stories of the sea.

No one could match him in story telling. No one ever matched him in anything until Judy Colston came to town.

Judy, the golden haired child actress who had grown up to be a world toast, who was at the moment one of the great names of the theater. I knew all about her. The papers from the Atlantic states were filled with her praises and we in California were very conscious of the theater.

Our interest, and the ready gold from the mines drew more than one star of international repute to San Francisco, and many of them, after playing the city, took to the hills to play the inland camps and towns.

But it had not occurred to me that Judy would ever come to Sonora, and when she arrived it was unannounced. I guessed it was a show as soon as I saw the dusty wagons pull into the Plaza, but I had no warning until she stepped into the print shop and introduced herself.

"I'm Judy Colston," she said in a tone which could not be misunderstood. "My manager is sick, which is a bother, so, I'm handling the arrangements myself. This is a newspaper, isn't it?" She looked around the low ceilinged room as if there was some doubt.

Old Ike, our printer who didn't like women, was at the rear of the shop, cleaning the press. He took one look and then ducked from sight. I managed to unswallow my tongue.

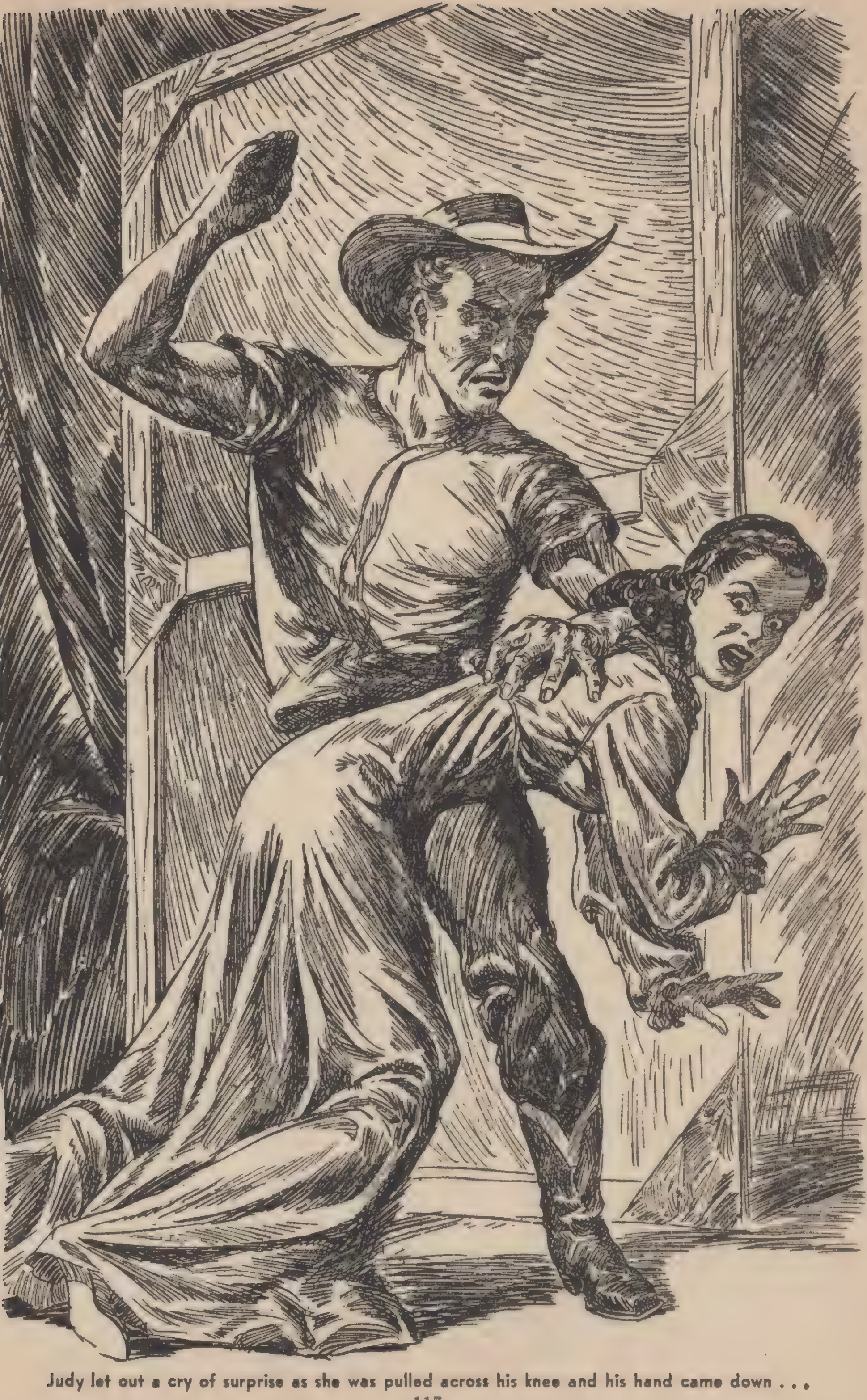
"Yes ma'am."

"Who's in charge?" She tapped the uneven floor with her toe.

"Well," I said, "My uncle owns the paper, only he went to Jamestown and I don't expect him back till after dark."

She was smaller than I had imagined and she didn't look old enough to have been to London and Paris and those foreign places.

"Bother," she said. Her eyes were very blue and darkened when she was annoyed until they were almost purple. "We'll be in Sonora three days, perhaps a week if there's enough patronage. I shall expect cooperation from your newspaper and in return we will give



Judy let out a cry of surprise as she was pulled across his knee and his hand came down . . .

you the printing of the playbills. You know who I am of course?"

"Yes ma'am."

"And now if you'll direct me to the theater, and tell me where to contact the owner. If my manager wasn't sick this would have all been handled before we arrived but . . ."

"Yes ma'am."

"Well, ninny, is 'yes ma'am' all you can say? Where's the theater?"

"There . . . isn't any."

"Isn't any?" She was startled. "But Mr. Booth played this camp last season. I understood there was a very good theater."

"That was last year. We had the best theater in all the Southern Mines, only, only we had a fire. It burned down."

SHE looked at me. Her toe tapping had stopped. When she spoke she sounded incredulous. "You . . . you mean there's no place in town, not a single place I can use as a theater?"

Suddenly I wasn't scared of her any more. She was like a little girl, all dressed up in her mother's clothes.

"Gee," I said, "I'm sorry." I felt guilty for the town because we hadn't rebuilt the theater. "You see the fire cleared out the business section on the other side of Washington. Some buildings have been replaced, but . . ."

"There must be some place. There must be."

I thought of the Auction Tent. It was half a mile out, down by the creek, a big canvas covered structure where Bannerman held his sales.

"Look," I said. "There's a tent. It seats near two hundred and it's got a kind of platform you could use for a stage."

She raised both small fists in the air as if she had reached the limit of her endurance. "A tent. Judy Colston appearing in a tent."

"It's not so bad," I told her. "Lots of shows are given out doors. Why, a company played Macbeth at Camp Seco and the actors had to stand on stumps so the audience could see them."

"Well," she said, her voice suppressed. "If that's the way it is, that's the way it is. Who owns this tent?"

"Tom Bannerman owns it," I said. "He hasn't an auction this week, goods being scarce, besides he's interested in the theater. In fact he's always wanted to be an actor. You should hear him imitate Yankee Robinson singing, *I'm a Used Up Man.*"

"Please," she said. "I have seen Doctor Robinson at the Dramatic Museum. I do not care for his brand of comedy and I certainly do not care to see anyone imitate him, especially an amateur."

I was hurt and angry. She was Judy Colston, but for my money Tom Bannerman could do anything any actor ever did and do it better.

I said as much when I found him in the lobby of the Union Exchange Hotel. "She called you an amateur," I said. "She's very uppy, and I wouldn't ask you to let her use the Tent if it weren't for the town. But Sonora can't turn away a world famous actress."

"Never mind," he said grinning, and there was a glint in his brown eyes. "We'll make this actress respect us amateurs, Austin. You just leave her to me."

"Well," I said, "there she is now," for the girl had just entered the lobby.

Bannerman turned as she came forward. I was tall for my age but I always felt small standing beside him. He was big, and very strong.

The girl must have guessed who he was for she said, "I'm Judy Colston."

I expected Tom to put her in her place, but instead he swept off his hat and bowed. "Gracious Lady, Sonora is honored."

Even Judy Colston, conditioned to the world's adoration, was a little startled.

"We regret," Tom continued, "that fire has robbed us of a suitable theater for one of your ability and charm, but if you will use my humble tent, you are more than welcome."

"That's very kind." It was apparent she could not decide whether she was being ridiculed. "We'll pay you any reasonable amount.'

"Gracious Lady," said Tom. "Pay is of no importance, but there is one small condition. It has always been my ambition to tread the boards, to act . . . and to play a lead opposite Judy Colston . . ."

She looked at him wildly. "Surely you're joking?"

He winked at me without her seeing.

"Gracious Lady, Bannerman never jokes."

"Stop it," she stamped her foot. "Stop calling me that. I'm not gracious and this whole thing is absurd. Mine is a professional company. Most of them were with me during my European tour . . . you couldn't hope to fit in with them."

TOM gave me another wink as he drew himself up. "Madam, you do not know Bannerman. I am the greatest auctioneer in the Southern Mines, perhaps in all California. I can sell anything, at any price."

Her toe was tapping the floor again. "There is some slight difference between acting and selling things. Mr. Emil Talcot, my leading man, has played before the crowned heads of Europe."

"And I," said Bannerman, "have conducted sales before some of the richest men in San Francisco. They, Madam, could easily buy and sell those crowned heads you speak of."

The girl stared around as if for help. "This is impossible. This is simply impossible. Imagine him as Hamlet."

At that she was right. I always associated Hamlet with tights, and I couldn't picture Tom in tights, stepping out before all his friends.

But he managed to look offended. "Either you accept me as a leading man, Madam, or I shall be forced to refuse the use of my tent."

She made a despairing gesture. "But . . . you don't even know the lines. You couldn't possibly master the part in time."

"Oh, I know them well enough," he said airily.

The girl's eyes were suddenly crafty. "I'll make a bargain with you, Mister Auctioneer. I'll give you three cues. If you can give me the following line, you play Hamlet. If you miss, we use the tent, but Talcot will play the Prince."

I caught my breath, but Bannerman nodded solemnly. "A fair proposition," he said. "Fire away."

Judy Colston smiled. She seemed very certain of herself as she said . . . *"could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than with honesty?"*

Bannerman swelled his chest and his auctioneer's voice rolled out. *"Ay, truly, for the powers of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is, to a bawd."*

The actress looked startled. Other people in the lobby turned to look, but Bannerman ignored their stares. Judy's blue eyes narrowed thoughtfully and she hesitated as she gave the second cue.

I could not recall the line, but Bannerman never faltered. His rich tones again filled the room.

Judy Colston chewed her lip in vexation and tears weren't far behind the blue eyes. There was a pause before she said in a not too steady voice. "All right, the last one now."

"Almost at odds with morning, which is which . . ."

Bannerman's jaw set in a way that made me know he was angry. He took a quick step forward and seizing her shoulders forced her to look up at him. "A very low piece of chicanery, Lady Macbeth. It wasn't stated that your cues should be from *Hamlet*, but it was certainly inferred. When you failed to trip me, you chose from another play. The next line is,

"How say'st thou, that McDuff denies his person at our great bidding?"

Judy Colston's face had gone dead white. When Bannerman let his hands fall she turned as if fleeing from something. "All right. You know the lines. A bargain is a bargain." Then she was gone, with us staring after her.

I looked at Bannerman, expecting to see him still angry, but his lips were curved, his eyes still on the doorway.

"That was a mean trick," I said.

He clapped my shoulder. "There goes a woman, Austin. It will be many a cold day before a woman like that comes to these hills again."

"She's wilful," I said.

"And spoiled, used to having her own way, but we'll teach her to lose gracefully, Austin, and it will be worth the effort, well worth it. You'll see."

I WASN'T fully convinced, but there were other things to think of. I suppose Emil Talcot was a good actor. He was a tall man, with a thinly interesting face. His eyes were dark, deep-set and his hair was long and very black. He looked like Hamlet, even when not in costume.

Actually he'd dressed for the journey as carefully as for a part. He wore a slouch hat at a rakish angle, a miner's red shirt, butternut California pants and boots with tops almost as soft as a leather glove.

Tom Bannerman admired the boots. He said, "Talcot isn't exactly the type of man I'd choose to be, but I'd sure admire to be in his boots."

"I like them too," I said.

Bannerman looked at me and chuckled. "Sometimes you amaze me, Austin."

I didn't know what he was talking about and I had no chance to find out, for Talcot was coming toward us. Tom was there for the first rehearsal and I had come to see the transformation of the tent.

The benches had been rearranged on the hard packed earth floor and the space behind the platform curtained into dressing rooms.

Between them and the stage hung a backdrop, painted to resemble the interior of a castle. This was suspended from a rope, stretched across the end of the tent. A second rope had been placed above the front of the stage for the curtain, and whale oil lamps were set in a row for footlights. All in all it made a creditable theater.

I knew the curtains and props had come in the wagons, but most of the work of placing them had fallen on Bannerman, since Talcot and the other actors were not much given to manual labor.

"It's swell," I told Tom, but he was looking at Talcot who said,

"I want to speak to you." He had a slightly pompous manner and a way of pushing his hair back from his forehead which struck me as highly affected.

"Go ahead," said Bannerman.

"You're being insufferable," said Talcot. "You'll ruin the whole venture by insisting on playing Hamlet. The fact that you know the lines means nothing. The importance comes in getting your teeth into the part, in playing it, feeling it. A fool can repeat lines like a parrot; only an actor can breathe life into a character."

Bannerman frowned. "Miss Colston made a bargain with me. Did she send you to say this?"

Talcot drew himself up. "Miss Colston doesn't wrangle with people. I took it on myself to give you her views."

"Getting a little big, aren't you?"

Talcot reddened. "I'll tell you something which we have been keeping secret for professional reasons. Miss Colston and I plan to be married."

I was surprised, not that I liked the girl very well, but I thought even she deserved a better break than Emil Talcot.

But Bannerman showed no surprise. "Congratulations," he said, "but none of this affects my arrangement with Miss Colston."

"Nothing was signed," said Talcot.

Color crept up under the brown of Tom's skin. "I've done business here for two years without signing anything. In this country, a man respects his word, which is something you and your future wife should learn. If you use this tent, I play Hamlet, that's final."

Talcot was very angry, but instead of answering he turned and stomped away across the makeshift stage. Bannerman went on with the rehearsal as if nothing had happened.

EVEN I had to admit that his performance left much to be desired. My uncle believed that no education was complete without a thorough familiarity with Shakespeare and I had read Hamlet several times. I had always pictured the melancholy Dane as a hungry looking, unhappy individual.

Tom Bannerman, big, genial, filled with the love of life, his face tanned by sun and wind, was certainly not the prototype of the miserable prince.

But further than that, he kidded the part in little ways which threw the rest of the cast off their performance and made the rehearsal a failure. When it was finished, Judy Colston's face was white. She turned and left the tent without a word.

Tom and I walked slowly back to town. "How was I?"

"Well," I said, "I'm not exactly a judge, since I haven't seen many actors."

He grinned wryly. "Meaning I'm rotten?"

"Well, you haven't had a lot of practice." I was still loyal.

"You're too polite, Austin. I'm a bad actor. I never realized there was so much to it. Tell you a secret. I didn't mean to go through with it. A man feels a fool, play acting, but after what Talcot said, I've just got to. I can't back down on my bluff."

I knew he wasn't concerned with Emil Talcot. It was the girl. "She's wilful," I repeated my warning.

"She's got a mind of her own, and a lot of spunk," his voice was warm. "Takes a lot of spunk to go wandering round the world in wagon trains and such, especially for a pretty girl."

"She's going to marry Talcot, remember."

Bannerman gave me a strange look, then was unusually silent for the rest of the walk, hardly speaking as we parted.

My uncle had printed five hundred play bills and I was given the job of distributing them through Jamestown, Shaw's Flat, Yankee Hill, Columbia. The interest in all the camps was tremendous and I knew there would be as many miners in town as showed up for the Fourth of July celebration.

I was just leaving the livery corral when I met Judy on the street. She seemed very meek and subdued as she said, "I'd like to ask a favor, Mr. Garner."

She was one of the first to ever call me Mister and I'd have done anything for her at the moment. "What is it, ma'am?"

"Tom Bannerman considers you his best friend in town," she put out a small hand to touch the rough cloth of my jacket sleeve. "Please make him listen to you. He's . . . he'll only seem the fool if he goes ahead, because he can't act. He goes through the part like an elephant pretending to be a mouse. It won't be fair to the audience for an amateur to spoil the show . . ."

If she hadn't used the word amateur I'd have tried to talk with Tom, but somehow the word had taken on the meaning of an insult.

"He'd be more apt to listen to you than he would to me," I said.

Her eyes flashed. "Do you think I'd ask him? I wouldn't put myself in the position of asking Tom Bannerman anything if he were the last man in the world."

Her vehemence surprised me and I was left speechless as she turned and hurried away, not even noticing the open admiration of the men standing around the Plaza.

THE show was scheduled to begin at seven o'clock, but I was in my seat by six. The dress circle was supposed to be reserved, but experience had taught me that usually more tickets were sold than there were seats, and that the standees appropriated any vacant space.

The house filled rapidly and there was much comment on how the Tent had been altered. Especially were the spectators impressed by the painted curtain, so heavy that the rope on which it slid sagged dangerously.

At seven sharp an air of expectancy crept through the crowd and loud voices were lowered to dull whispers, but nothing happened. After five minutes the crowd grew impatient, and when ten minutes had passed there were cat calls and whistles from the rear of the house.

I sat fidgeting in my aisle seat. Suddenly the curtain parted, the side lamps were dimmed and we saw the stage.

But Bannerman was nowhere in sight. Emil Talcot played Hamlet. I suppose his performance was good. Afterwards I heard favorable comment on the first act. But curiosity and worry would not allow me to give my attention to the stage.

I had a sudden terrible suspicion. Tom Bannerman had lost his nerve. The action was so foreign to his nature that I could hardly believe it, but certainly he wasn't there.

Finally I could stand the suspense no longer. I slipped from my seat and stole toward the exit. Once outside, I circled the Tent, stopping opposite where I knew Tom's dressing room to be.

The wall was pegged down, but I kicked the fastenings loose and managed to crawl under.

The room inside was lighted only by the glow which crept around the canvas drape. This showed me the plain table and stool, and then slight movement in the shadow beyond the table attracted my attention. I pushed the flap aside, getting more light, and saw Tom Bannerman.

He lay on his side, his arms and legs bound, a white rag stuffed into his mouth. The ropes were very tight, but my knife was sharp, and I slashed them without difficulty, then I loosened the gag and pulled it from his lips.

"What happened to you?"

His muscles were so cramped that he could barely move. I helped him onto the stool and rubbed the blood back into his arms and legs.

There was nothing wrong with his tongue. "Damn actors," he muttered thickly. "You can't trust them, Austin. They just aren't right to trust."

"Shh." I told him, for the voices from the stage came plainly through the backdrop and I knew his heavy tones would easily reach the audience.

He flexed his fingers, trying to restore them to life. "I was getting dressed," he muttered. "I was going through with it even if it killed me, and Talcot and three roustabouts came in. One got behind me and dropped a noose around my neck. A man can't fight with his wind cut off."

"Gee, that's terrible."

"I'll make it terrible," he said, grimly. "I'll show them not to make an agreement with Bannerman and then welch. She never had any intention of living up to her word from the first. She planned all along to have me tied up and out of the way before the show started." He struggled to his feet, stamping them to quicken the returning blood.

"I told her, no show unless I played Hamlet. Well, I'll stop it, right now."

I caught his arm. "You can't do that, Tom, at least wait until the end of the first act."

"I'll wait for nothing," but even as he spoke there was a burst of applause from the front of the tent and I guessed the act was over.

TOM started for the door. I got in his way, but he brushed me aside. I followed him, arriving on the stage in time to see him confront the girl.

Fortunately the curtain was already drawn, the actors heading for the dressing rooms. They stopped and they couldn't have stared harder had Tom been the King's ghost.

Talcot shrunk away toward the far corner, but Tom's full-bodied wrath was directed at the girl. "You made a bargain with me for the use of this tent, and you failed to keep it. You had me tied up so that Talcot could play the part."

"But . . ."

"There's no argument. You've got to learn once and for all that an actress has to keep a bargain as well as anybody else, and I'm the one to teach you!"

The girl drew herself up angrily. In her costume, her eyes flashing, she looked like something out of this world, something so beautiful that it made you catch your breath, but Tom, blinded by anger was not affected.

"And just how do you mean to teach me?" she demanded.

Before any of us realized his intent, he had her spread across his knees and was spanking her.

The actress screamed, Talcot started forward, caught his toe in a coiled rope, stumbled and fell into the curtain. His weight, added to that of the painted canvas, was too much for the overstrained rope. It snapped and the curtain fell out into the first row of spectators.

For an instant there was a startled gasp from the surprised audience. Men leaped to their feet, fearing fire, but saw that the canvas was clear of the whale oil foot lights. Then laughter grew like a rising tide and swelled through the tent as they realized that the famous Judy Colston was being thoroughly spanked.

Tom was still so angry that he noticed nothing until the laughter made him turn his head, then, surprised, he dropped the girl and leaped to his feet. The laughter grew to a roar.

He gave one look at the howling miners, then turned and fled.

Judy Colston picked herself up, and with what dignity she could summon walked to the footlights, holding up her hands.

The laughter died to a murmur and she spoke clearly. "There's been an accident. I need five strong men to restring the curtain."

The miners loved a good sport, and Judy was proving herself one of the best. Fifty men leaped to their feet. She coolly selected five, and directed the whole operation.

In five minutes the curtain was back in place, in ten the second act began, Judy rallying the shaken actors by her calm.

I didn't stay through the play. I went in search of Bannerman. I knew exactly how he must feel and in a way it was my fault. If I'd left him tied in his dressing room none of it would have happened.

I found him at the Union Exchange, packing. I pushed open his door and stood watching him.

"What are you going to do?"

"Get as far away from this country as I can," he didn't look up.

"That won't do any good. You can't run away from yourself."

HE TURNED his face toward me and I was surprised to see how drawn it looked. "Never try to play God, Austin. Never try to change people. Either accept them as they are, or let them alone. I've ruined that girl. Not only here, but all over the world the story will follow her and men will laugh. The actress who got spanked." He buried his face in his hands. "I'd give a lot to be able to wipe out this night, to fix it so that it never happened."

I could think of nothing to say. I couldn't even bear to stay and watch him suffer. I closed the door and went downstairs to the lobby.

I was standing there wondering what to do when Judy came in. She was still in costume. She must have slipped out as soon as the play was finished, for the crowd hadn't yet gotten uptown.

"Austin," she stopped when she saw me, then caught my arm and pulled me toward the stairs. "Come up to my room. I want to tell you something."

I followed unwillingly and she talked all the time we were climbing the stairs. "I'm leaving town tonight," she said, "as soon as the wagons are loaded. I couldn't remain here after what's happened. Obviously we can't continue to use Mr. Bannerman's tent."

We had reached the upper hall. "He's sorry," I said. "He feels terrible."

"He should," she sounded angry. "But there's one thing you must tell him, Austin. I didn't even know he had been tied up. That was Emil Talcot's idea, and I'm firing him as soon as I can get another actor. Whether Mr. Bannerman believes it or not, Judy Colston respects a bargain. I expected him to play Hamlet, even if I did think it would ruin the performance. When he failed to show up, I thought he'd lost his nerve. I held the curtain ten minutes and I was angry. I can't stand for anyone to fail to appear for a performance. So, I had to put Emil in the part."

The door behind her had opened without either of us hearing, and Bannerman was standing there, looking at the girl.

"Say that again, the part about firing Talcot. I thought you meant to marry him?"

"Marry that ninny . . ."

"That's all I wanted to know," Bannerman sounded different, more like his usual self. "Run along, Austin, this is between Miss Colston and me."

The girl said, "Keep your hands off me." She didn't say it very loud.

"No," said Bannerman. "I want to talk to you."

"I won't listen."

"You will," he told her, "and you'll like it." He was talking rapidly, and he had her by the shoulders.

I went quietly away and neither noticed. I wasn't worried. I knew the girl didn't have a chance now that Tom was back to normal. He might not be able to match her in acting but he was the fastest talker in the Southern Mines. He could sell anything to anyone, and Judy Colston was no exception.

INDIAN HONOR

by Art Felman

IF the record is closely examined, it will be found that a lot of lies have been told about the Apache, the Sioux, the Cheyennes, and all the rest of the famous tribes which warred against the United States government. They have been painted a lot blacker than they really were.

It is often said that the Indian was a sneaky and treacherous foe. That simply isn't true. Whenever treachery can be detected on the part of the Indian, it is always preceded by the same on the part of the whites. How often did the government and the army make promises which weren't kept? How often did they use agents who weren't fit to clean latrines? How often did they break their word to the tribesmen?

Other things so often criticized are the mores and practices of the Indian warrior. Their murder of women and children and their habit of torture of captives are often discussed. It should be realized that these were a primitive people with standards and laws all their own. While by our standards they may have been horrible, by their own they were strictly honorable. And we have no right to condemn them morally. Look at what the white man has done to women and children in his wars.

The Indians were lied to, cheated, beaten, murdered, and in general, so badly treated, that anything they did seems in this cooler light, almost justifiable. The tribesmen had a strict code of honor, as strong as any gentlemanly beliefs that we may retain and they lived and abided by that code. The white brought the vengeance of them against him purely by his own acts and deeds. If all foemen were as honorable as the Indian this would have been a better world by far.

GUN RUNNING

by Milton Matthew

ONE of the most lucrative business ventures of the time before the first World War, was the practice of running guns into Mexico across the Texan border. Because the revolutionaries in Mexico were so anxious to get arms, and because Mexico had few manufacturing facilities then, it was standard practice for clever Americans to pyramid a fortune by the simple expedient of buying guns at a nominal rate, crating them as machinery or anything else suitable, and running them across the border at night. This payed off. The revolutionaries usually were glad to pay the asking price for anything that would shoot.

Europeans were jumping in on the trade too. It wasn't so easy for Americans to buy guns in quantity lots without making their intentions clear, which naturally got them into trouble with government agents. But European factories were willing to sell guns, even artillery, to anyone with the ready cash. The result was that thousands of artillery pieces, and hundreds of thousands of small-arms of European manufacture are still to be found in Mexico today.

Government forces, agents and rangers patrolled the border closely and they often caught the quantity smugglers, but more succeeded than failed. In any event, the revolutionaries were rarely short of arms. Later, this gun-running extended to Central and South America, but here more of the work was done by Europeans.

Along with guns, there was a reciprocal smuggling of Asiatics from Mexico to the United States. The Texan border was a hot spot for a long time. As a matter of fact, it still is today, only the material smuggled is even worse—dope!

The Chinese Cross

By John Di Silvestro

Ah Kim was a mild mannered man with peace on his mind, until he was double-crossed; then he fought back quickly—the Chinese way...

IT WAS hot and terrible in the bunkhouse. Everywhere were western story magazines—over there a chipped issue of Esquire. The open door of the toilet room revealed a noisy toilet and pin-up pictures of naked females on the damp walls of the compartment.

Ah Kim, the cook's assistant, bent over the bowl of the toilet, working with a long piece of wire and a plunger.

I've got enough stomach to help anybody I like, so I went to the lavatory and asked Kimmy if I could help him.

"No," he said, turning around for me to see the grateful smile which slanted over his yellow-ivory face.

"Give me the wire."

He shook his head, but I nudged him and he pushed over.

It took us twenty minutes. I pulled the chain and the water in the bowl didn't run over.

I felt pretty sick.

The little Chinese looked at me. He didn't have to keep smiling for me. We were both in the same rotten boat.

"Mister Shicker could have summoned a plumber for this filthy task," he hummed, the words coming as softly as the sweat which dripped from his little nose.

"He's a dirty, pointless cow," I said. "He's going to push somebody too far some day."

"He has."

"Yeah, guess we'd both like to go to his funeral."

"We shall, Gip."

I laughed, even if I didn't feel like it. "If we step out of line for one minute it voids our parole. I'm not a lily, but I'd rather be dead than in a Texas jail in summer."

"He's a devil, as all white—." He smiled quickly. "Forgive me."

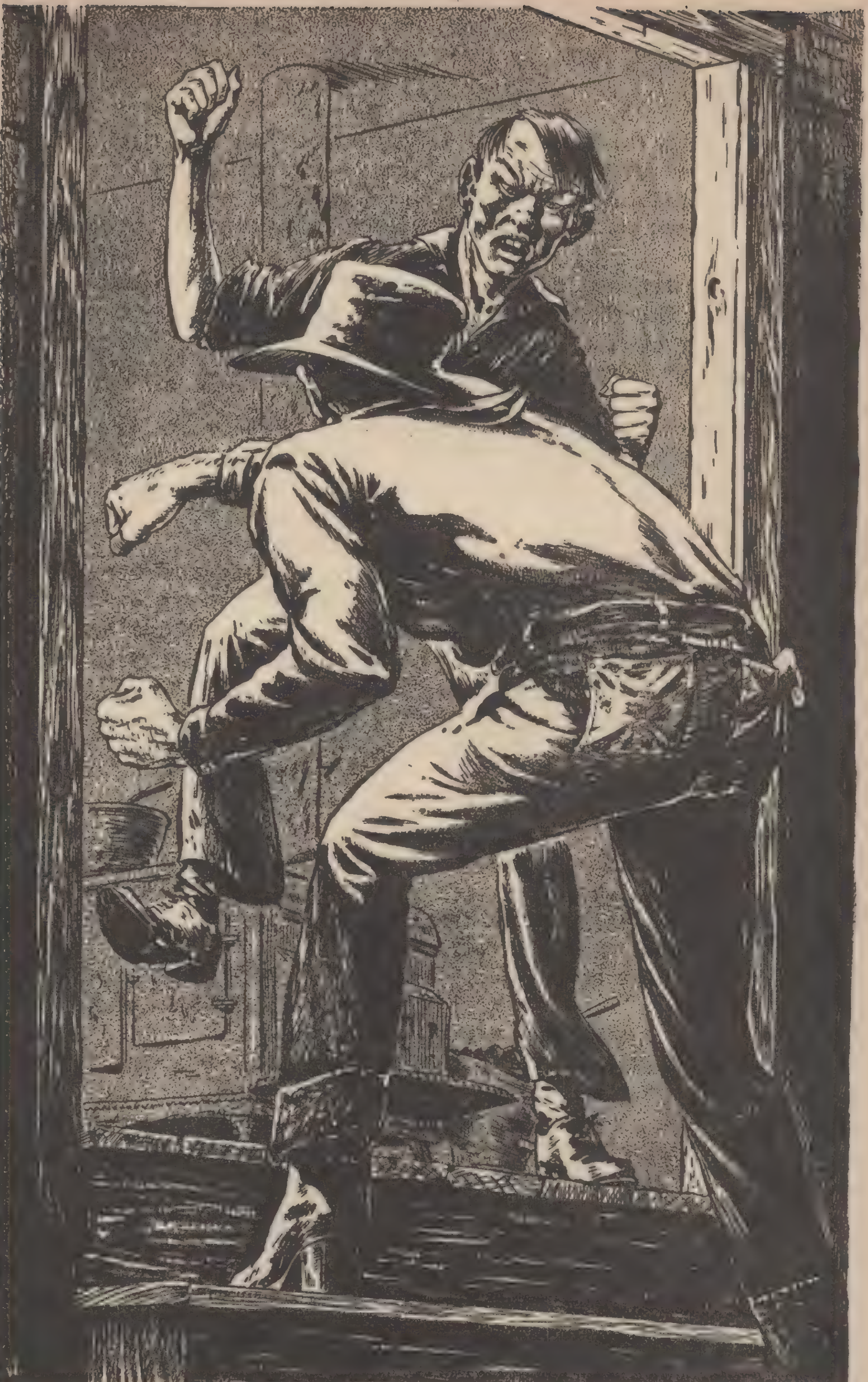
"Right, but there're lots of nice whites."

"He pays us forty dollars a month because we are on parole. He goes to the warden, shows his pleasing personality, begs to give one of 'the poor devils' another chance." Kim shook his head from side to side, as if to drive away an evil thought. "He's a sadist. He enjoys our plight. At least in prison the guards were men."

I watched a roach climb the wall. "Shicker'll be coming back any minute. Don't lose your temper."

"Once I lost my temper—you can never retrieve what you have lost—but I shall never lose my mind."

I grinned and went out into the hot



Ah Kim fought back savagely, but he knew he was no match for the man in the cellarway . . .

air. What a dusty, scorching place Texas is.

I'm not a cowpuncher, cook or horse handler. I'm just the local slavey. I drive the station wagon into town for food and mail, do the typing and whatever else they want on this big Zero-O ranch.

I crossed the yard, thinking of Lorey. She's the only nice thing about this profitable corner of hell. She's short, with big sensible brown eyes and a twenty-year-old figure which makes you want to eat your overalls. She's not beautiful or intelligent or smart. She's just a big serving of woman without any corset strings attached. I think that's what knocks me for the long loop—like these guys out here say.

Because I'm about her age she treats me like a kid. I couldn't help but remember what Shicker told Kimmy and me—that we were akin to some kind of a helpless little dog to his way of thinking, and he added that he didn't like little dogs.

The pretty little log cabin which served as the office was hotter than my thoughts when I pushed past the screen door and nodded to Lorey.

She had the two fans going and the breezes were pushing her straight brown hair away from her sun-slapped face.

"Here, sit at the desk, I'll dictate."

I sat on the rubber cushion she vacated and put my fingers over the keys of the rattling typewriter.

SHE picked up a piece of paper and started to read. Slow. Quicker. Slow. Quicker. She wasn't fooling me. She had the letter properly composed on the sheet of paper. She wanted me to think her smart.

I'm a speedy typist, my only honest talent, so she couldn't have beat me with the hackneyed words. She dictated two more letters to the typewriter while I thought of a million other things.

"Okay." She put her hands behind her back. "They're all right, you don't have to retype them."

"Okay."

She signed them. I had to lick the flaps of the envelopes and put the stamps on. I wondered why I liked her, but I guess I knew.

She said, "Dad wants the porch steps fixed."

"Okay."

She walked to the screen door, turned. "I don't feel so good today, Gip. Sorry if I was rude."

"It's okay."

She swished away.

Guess anybody would be sick if a guy like Shicker was in love with you; but everybody said Lorey craved him too. Craved. I'm beginning to think like these guys out here.

I went to the bunkhouse. Shicker was sitting at the table and Kimmy was placing cake and coffee before him.

Shicker glanced at me. "What do you want?" He swallowed some of the coffee.

"Hammer and nails—to fix the porch steps."

He picked up the cake, taking a bite, flakes stuck to his sweat-red face. He resembles Robert Taylor of the movies. Widow-peak, black hair, good nose. Then again, his was a handsomeness close to being ugly.

Kimmy followed me out. He was laughing. I could tell because his jaw muscles were jumping. "I didn't wash my hands since cleaning the toilet," he said.

"Good." I went to the porch and fixed the step. I laughed for a while. A lot of funny things happen on a ranch, especially when the foreman's a nameless son. I hoped to God the germs glutted his rotten head.

At six the boys came in for supper. It was the only pleasant part of the day because Shicker ate with the Old Man and Lorey in the big house.

I've lived in some tough neighborhoods—but you won't find a harder crew than on a ranch. Talk about juvenile delinquency. Out here in the middle of hell there ain't any because nobody calls the cops.

The ten of us joked and ate, and Kimmy put on his *mandrian* act, goofing up like Hope. He's quite an actor.

I was putting a piece of biscuit into my mouth when I thought of something. I choked when I tried not to swallow it. I went into the kitchen, motioned Kimmy into a corner. "Did you wash your hands—yet?"

He laughed till the tears spidered around his little eyes. "Of course, you madman, do you think I'm heartless?"

I grinned, and went back to the biscuit. It didn't taste so good.

KIMMY, Luke, Sorp and I were trying to keep interested in the penny ante poker game when Shicker came in. He walked directly to our part of the big dining table.

Kimmy froze.

Shicker slapped Kimmy, hard, across the back. Little Kim bumped against the table and I heard his teeth chatter.

"China boy," said Shicker, "you kin be rice boy at my wedding."

Lukey was sore. "You getting hitched, Shick?" He was trying to distract him.

"Yeah, Lukey. Me'n Lorey. Old Man just consented. I'll have my own spread now. You boys kin kiss the cows good-by fer me."

"Congratulations," Kimmy said pleasantly.

Shicker looked at him. "Glad to be gettin' rid of me, eh, China boy?"

"Of course . . . not."

"You yellow little runt."

Kimmy smiled. "My ancestors were as yellow as Khan."

"Can, huh?" And the guy laughed.

It went on like that. All of us keeping quiet because he'd be having his own spread now with the Old Man backing him, and we'd be rid of him.

* * *

"I'd kill 'im if I thought he'd fight with real tools," said Lukey after Shicker had left.

Kimmy didn't say anything.

"There's something the matter with Shick," said Sorp. "He's always been this way."

Lukey glanced at Kim. "No use you gettin' riled. It's good riddance to the 'cat."

Kimmy shrugged. "You have a cigarette, Gip?"

Everybody reached for cigarettes. He took a Camel from Sorp. "Thank you."

"Things'll be different when he's gone," said Lukey.

"Not for Lorey," said Kim, and I guess Luke and Sorp started to think about Lorey, whom they'd known since she'd climbed up their boots.

"He better not," snapped Sorp.

We all knew better, of course. Nobody really could do anything about a man like Shicker without dying for it.

I said, "Kim, tell 'em about the coffee and cake you gave Shicker."

The boys helped me hound him and very slowly Kim recounted the story, adding funny little parts.

"Hope the worms eat out his belly," said Sorp.

Kimmy won thirteen cents in the poker game, and we all said it was good luck to win thirteen cents.

Kimmy fooled with the pennies before him. "Why is life so important to Americans?"

"Kinda silly, now that you brought it up," said Lukey, his hard face softening. "Back in ten—was just a kid—the hands usta work themselves crazy."

"Mister Shicker shall finish himself," said Kimmy.

THAT night I dreamed that I was lost in the desert, thirsty and hot, with only toilets spread out all over the terrain. I woke up, screaming, after taking a drink.

"Sick, Gip?" It was Kim.

"Dream."

"Yes, we all dream."

The boys yelled for us to keep quiet, but Kim never made any noise.

"Gip, I wish I could think of something to do to Shicker."

"We could. . . ."

"What?"

"Attack him."

"We could."

After a while Kimmy said something like "devil" and went back to his bunk.

I went to the sink and drank three glasses of water; but the bad taste was still in my mouth. *The mind is a funny thing*. Sure is . . .

* * *

At breakfast Shicker was in a wonderful mood, he joked and passed the biscuits and asked everybody if they were sure they didn't want another cup of coffee before heading for the cows.

Everybody wanted another cup.

"Me'n Lorey'll settle at the old Bigger ranch—we'll stock up, any of you boys know of any boys lookin' for jobs?"

Nobody did.

"Hey, Kim, before I forget, when me'n Lorey come back from honeymoonin' you'll be our house boy."

The wind pushed around us, making crickety sounds as it slapped us in the faces.

"I'll be ready," said Kim. "When do I go to the Bigger ranch?"

"Oh, month. We're getting hitched next Sunday. We been engaged for three years."

All of us watched Kim walk away with the dishes, his shoulders were very straight and soldier-like.

From ten to eleven in the morning Kimmy and I loaf. At that time Lorey's usually puttering around somewhere in the house. The Old Man's out riding with the boys and Shicker would be at his new ranch.

We went into the office and I turned on the radio.

"Ah, *Trumpet Blues,*" said Kim as the record started.

"Harry James is good."

"How wonderful are most things in America . . ."

"And now," said the guy on the radio, *Hogwash Whirl.*"

Kim's cheeks puffed, his breath was a noisy thing. I fiddled the dial around till I found some boogie. He came around.

"I hate these western songs, Gip."

"Me too."

He laughed. A slow sound. He only laughed when he was thoroughly disgusted with himself.

"You like the girl, Gip?"

"Lorey's all right."

"There aren't many left like her."

"No there ain't."

"She reminds me of a statue my father would tell me about, one that's in the old country. It was partly in the ground, visible from the torso up . . ."

"Mean something?"

"Sometimes the Chinese confound themselves. Isn't that a reason?"

"Always."

"Gip, eight months from now we will be free to go. Forget the foolish attraction of easy money."

"For God's sake—"

"I'm sincere. It hurts me to preach, but you're a fine lad. Get a wife."

I laughed. "Did you ever get a wife?"

"There aren't many Chinese ladies."

"You aren't happy here. Why don't you go back?"

"Because I really don't belong there now."

"Shake, I don't know where I belong either."

"I'm opening a laundry."

"Come to Chicago."

"Dirt is everywhere. Join me in my piteous venture?"

"Jesus—a laundry's hot."

"Yes, it is."

"We could do better for ourselves."

"Not in this world."

". . . Listen! *Beverly Boogie,* good tune."

He kept jiggling his feet while the record played, but the radio guy spoiled it by talking about horse feed while the record was still going.

"A curse-and-a-half on him," laughed Kimmy.

I slapped the radio key and we were alone in the heat of the room. He didn't like the fans, so I didn't turn them on.

"I'll make him wish he had the freedom of a dung pile."

"Cut it out, Kim. Get Shicker out of your mind. People don't need dry wash in hell."

Did he smile . . .

WE ALL had a fine time at the wedding. Lorey looked a little like a cartoonish pig in the expensive white get-up. Shicker looked like Robert Taylor, and everybody said so. The Old Man looked happy.

"He always wanted a son," said Lukey.

I snickered. "He's got a s.o.b. now."

"Lukey," said Sorp, "you listen to Gip. He knows what for."

Kimmy didn't attend the wedding.

Shicker was honeymooning while we watched the numbers on the calendar. Everything Shicker did, present or absent, affected some poor helpless guy.

Kimmy hated our kindness. While we were waiting for Shicker to return with Lorey it really was Kim who was cheering us up.

"I take good care of Mr. Shicker," he'd say.

Murder was in all of our hearts. As Lukey said: "Boys, I wisht Shick would fight with the tools."

"Never saw him fire a gun," said Sorp. "He jus' kid-fights with his hands."

Kimmy just stood there. Somehow we knew something terrible was going to happen. You could almost see it.

Sorp burned his finger on a cigarette while talking about Shicker. Lukey nearly took the name of the Lord in vain. Texans are mighty clean minded people. Things that are completely evil are killed—then forgotten, all in a clean, swift way. *To the clean everything is clean,* as it says in the Good Book.

It really didn't seem such a long time . . . but there we were: watching the taxi cloud away down along the road.

"Good luck, Kim," said Lukey. "Shick'll want you right away."

"If he ever—uh—ever does anything, let us know," said Sorp.

"Here, Kim, it's only a clasp-knife—"

"No, Gip. Steel is for the killer or warrior."

"You have to be both with that 'cat," said Lukey.

Sorp spat. "He only fights with his fists."

The taxi was coming through the big gate a half-mile away, so there was nothing we could do but wait for

Shicker.

THE hackey held the door open and Lorey stepped down. Shicker came out with some little traveling cases. She looked fresh as a wet flower. Shicker looked tired.

"You shoulda saw the hotel," said Shicker. "Little cabins—they calls 'em cabinas—all over the place. All you hadda do was pick up a phone and you got what you wanted. Ain't that right, Lorey?"

"Hollywood's a beautiful place." She smiled.

I listened. Maybe marriage had changed him.

Shicker kept on. "Cary Grant we saw and Gable and Turner and all them gals . . ." He smiled. "You know that actor that plays the part of two gun man—" And Shicker started in on the usual smut Hollywood visitors bring home. Most of the lies they say about Hollywood are true.

"I'm tired," Lorey said, walking away.

We listened to Shicker because we didn't feel like working. Then he mentioned a child actress . . .

Kimmy cut him short. "I really must be getting back to my little toilet," said Kimmy. "Plugged, you know."

Shicker stood there. He moved for Kimmy after a while.

"Na," said Lukey.

Sorp was grinning. "We don't buy trouble, Shick, or you woulda been dead eight years ago."

Shicker had some sense. He turned and went into the house.

"I couldn't resist it," said Kimmy.

"Nicest joke I ever did hear," said Lukey. "You sure spiked him with that remark."

Kimmy chuckled. "It's ten o'clock, that western song program's on the air now."

"Yeah," I seconded.

We went into the office and I clicked on the radio. Funny how folk music catches on all of a sudden.

"You boys going to settle here?" asked Sorp, after Spade Cooley had fiddled.

"Perhaps," said Kimmy. "A goodly amount of toilets here."

The rannies made enough noise to drown out the yodeler.

"You should be on the radio," said Sorp, poking Kimmy in the ribs.

"Then I would cease to enjoy myself."

Kimmy's the type of guy that will give himself every break, and yet make you feel like a gentleman. If he slanged like a native he would have never been accepted. He upheld the dignity of his race and, sure, he was respected and liked. He could laugh at himself, and really enjoy it. The important thing.

"He wants to open a laundry," I said.

"Holy smoke." Lukey frowned. "Steam's hot—that's tough work."

"It would be a penance for my wickedness."

"Pardner," said Sorp, smiling, "we's done plenty bad, only we ain't been caught at it."

"He had to kill that guy in Frisco," I said. "Self-defense."

"Why 'id they put you in jail then?" snapped Lukey.

"Ah." Kimmy smiled. "I wouldn't perjure myself on the stand. When my hand touched the bible before the district attorney questioned me I felt a terrible sadness. In my heart I knew that I would have killed that cheating scoundrel at the first chance. He merely gave me an opportunity by pulling the knife on me."

"He didn't have a clean record so they gave him some time," I said.

"Law's rotten," said Sorp. "You got money you can damn near get away with everything."

"Kimmy wouldn't've killed that guy," I said. "He's religious—he only said the truth at the trial. Sure he hated that guy, would've begged for a chance to get him in a fair fight. He said as much and the judge got sore."

They looked at Kim, saying nothing.

SHICKER came in. "What the hell you guys up to?"

Lukey and Sorp got up. "The Old Man's boss now," said Lukey.

"You guys get your junk ready," Shicker said, motioning to us.

"Me too?" I felt sick.

"Yeah, boy. The Old Man give me you for a present." He didn't laugh.

Kimmy went to his locker and brought out the shopping bag. He'd been ready.

Lukey cleared his throat. "Remember, boys, don't forget to call on us, we're right anxious to find out how you make out with Shick."

We watched them walk out.

"When you're ready," said Shicker, "bring the wagon 'round to the house."

"Okay."

He looked at us. "You boys have got a lot of months to work out yet. Remember it."

"I know," I said.

"You too, China Boy."

Kimmy nodded.

"Don't think you're smart 'cause you finally got the boys on your side of the fence."

I nodded again, nearly breaking my jaw when I tried to stop.

"You'll need God before I'm through with you." He was dead serious, seemed to be sick with rage. His big face watched us closely. Like an animal—he seemed to use every part of himself. When we didn't move or say anything he turned and went away.

"I told the boys not to favor us," said Kim.

"Blast 'em."

"You have your clasp-knife." His jaws were working.

I had to laugh too. "He's the first really mean man I've ever known, and I've seen a few."

"You better get your things together." He walked out. He's fifteen years older than me. Sometimes he gets annoyed with what I say. He hates the obvious to be tongued.

I threw my junk in a sack and went out. Kimmy was sitting in the front seat of the big Chrysler station wagon. He reached over and swung the door open for me. I got behind the wheel and pulled up near the house and tapped the horn.

Shicker and Lorey came out. She was wearing levis—must've been tailored for her—and a clean T-shirt. She could make anything seem feminine. She looked awful inviting. I glanced at Kimmy. He was looking at his very clean nails.

They piled in and I swung the wagon around. I can't stay sore at anyone very long, especially with a fast car under me.

"Make a breeze for us," yelled Shicker.

I pressed harder . . .

The Bigger place's big enough to satisfy any man. The workers had really slapped it into shape, and the furnishings were as nice as the Old Man's money could make it.

"I'll give you a trial at cooking," said Shicker to Kim. "If you make out—then all right."

Kim looked at Lorey. "I can prepare a few dishes."

"Bet they're good," I said.

"Chop Suey?" said Shicker.

"Chop Suey," said Kim.

"It's worster'n swill."

"Yes it is."

"I'll help you," said Lorey, and she took Kim into the kitchen.

"Fix the fences out front," he told me.

I went out and fixed fences.

IT'S not very hard to describe what followed. Shicker could be very nice—nobody is mean continually. He'd give us an afternoon off . . . but only God knew what mood he'd be in when we returned.

That made it hell, combined with his ordering us to open stuck windows in the middle of the night, keeping the bathroom clean, and so on.

"Shicker's drinking quite frequently," said Kim, while I was spreading *oil of winter green* over my aching arms.

"Before he'd go on a binge once in a while."

"Now he doesn't have an overseer."

"Yeah, some guys can't govern themselves."

"His type never can."

Lorey didn't like it one bit. She was a tough girl, and she didn't fall into the usual category of wives. One night they really had a fight. We, naturally, were getting some air, when she let fly.

"You're nothing but a crawling jigger—if you don't straighten out I'm going to Dad and you can go to—"

Shicker raved.

"And if you lay a hand on me I'll have the bank account switched to my name."

"Why—"

"Why nothing, and if I ever see you mistreating Gip or Kimmy again I'll break your pretty little head."

We could see their shadows, not a pretty thing to see. Man and wife hunched over, ready to tear at each other.

Shicker straightened out, said something, and came out. We were ducking into the bunkhouse when we heard the motor of the wagon. I went to the window and saw him drive off.

Kimmy sighed. "A woman is the most splendid instrument of torture ever created."

"Right."

"Gip, what's your favorite part?"

"Part of what?"

"Sorry."

I laughed. "She is something, ain't she?"

"Yes."

"The Chinese don't kiss, huh?"

"The moderns do."

"Are you modern?"

"Frightfully so."

I grinned. "Come off it."

"I never was on it."

I held out the pack and he took a cigarette. He never remembered to put a pack in his pocket.

"You really going to open a laundry, Kim?"

"Have to stay in character."

"That the real reason?"

"Yes."

"Nothing can make you change your mind?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"An enchanting woman."

"They can do anything."

"No, they can't."

"Oh, for God's sake."

He patted my arm. "You can be certain only of death. Yet we go along, working feverishly, not giving the only certainty on earth a thought."

"You're smart as hell."

"Showing off—it's rankly obvious."

"So that's what you think of me?" I laughed again. With him it seemed that I was always laughing.

"Don't go . . ."

I turned. "Lorey needs someone now."

"She'll always need someone, don't

hurt yourself."

"I can take care of myself."

"Until you're dead."

I got sore and went to the bunk. I picked up a slick paged magazine and looked at the pictures. Every girl resembled Lorey. I threw the book at Kimmy and tried to sleep.

"Take off your clothes, Gip. It helps."

"Go to hell."

"Ah. Visit her if you will. You will probably think it worth the attempt."

I sat up. "Don't grease me on."

"I wouldn't do any such thing."

He was grinning, so I took off my shoes, clothes and lay on the bunk, maybe I thought I was kidding somebody . . .

The cringe of the screen door brought me up. "Hey! Where you going, Kim?"

"To visit Lorey—poor female."

I couldn't find my shoes in the dark. I threw a chair at him.

I COULDN'T sleep after that, so I thought I'd stay awake till Shicker came back. Maybe I could warn Kimmy. Funny, but I thought that guy was capable of anything.

My feet took me to the porch of the main house. There was a light in the kitchen so I sneaked around.

Kimmy was sitting at the table, sipping coffee and chatting with her.

"Don't you worry, Kim," she was saying. "If you want I'll have Dad take you back to the Zero."

"No . . . no. We're quite happy here."

She smiled. "He's an animal."

"He's demented."

"Kim . . ." Softly, very softly. But his name is a soft one.

"Of course I'm sorry . . . now."

"He's really a boy."

Kim rose. "Good evening."

She laughed. "I'm not very bright, am I?"

"No."

I held my breath.

She laughed loudly. "You darn Chink, sit down and tell me about the rackets."

"Ah, fortunately I've labored at many things."

Kim started, and I felt the blood float around behind my eyes. I banged against the partly open window.

They turned.

"Come in." She was laughing again.

I felt silly. "What if Shicker comes back, quick-like?"

She looked me in the eye, her lips widening slowly. "Where do you think he's at now?"

"Why—I—"

"I know. I'm going to swallow some coffee with you boys. I like your company. When he comes crawling home I'll slap hell out of him and put the drunken pig to bed."

"I'll bet you really whack him," I said.

She sat down, lines running around her face. "No, I don't."

Kim slapped his leg. "Silence is not only golden—it's absolutely imperative in the presence of a woman."

She glared at him, but she was sore at everybody just then. She came around okay, and we had a nice time.

She knew we were watching her move, and she moved. When we refused to dance with her she gave us each a take-home smile and we watched our hands when she floated around.

She baked a cake and we ate it. Kimmy kept her in stitches with his gags. It was 4 A.M. when the wagon screeched to a halt in the yard.

He was drunk. We helped him into the bedroom.

She gently opened his collar, removed his shoes.

"Good-night," I said.

"For him." She touched my arm. "Sleep as long as you want in the morning."

Kim didn't say anything, starting for the door. She gave him a playful slap on the pants as he moved out. I'm glad she didn't do that to me. I'm sensitive.

I felt sorry for Kimmy. He adored her. He'd stand by the window, at night, waiting to catch a glimpse of her. I felt the same way, but I would have traded a bit to see him really happy.

"Can you really fall in love with a person of another color?" I said.

He put his hands over his eyes, rubbed, looked at me. "Because it is hopeless I am completely lost. I usually imagine romances with every female I meet. After a time I grow tired of the woman of the moment." He moaned. "Why did she have to touch me—"

"So intimately," I added. Couldn't help it. Maybe I'm no better than Shicker.

"Yes." He shook his head. "I can't get over it."

"Maybe you don't have to."

"Yes, I could forget it."

My turn to be cryptic—as they say in those fancy mags. "Can you?"

"I'm only certain of one thing."

"Don't give me that death routine."

"No, no. I meant the laundry."

"Brother, with her on your mind a furnace'd be cool."

"Please, speak your thoughts alone."

"Ain't got any."

"Don't say 'ain't'. You're a smart fella. Too damn smart."

THAT day Shicker had us fix up the roofing over the kitchen. Of course Lorey was on hand with cool drinks and warm smiles. I got the queerest feelings over her. I wished we were husband and wife for a long time . . . and happy about it. That sort of thing. Maybe I was tired.

Kim was the gentleman. I admired the guy. Few guys in love can be gentlemen.

After dinner Shicker left without a word and we didn't want to leave so we just sat and smoked and grinned at Lorey.

At eight o'clock I put a Helen Forrest record on the machine. Helen hurts me, so I sat in the big fat chair and watched the record go around as did my petty thoughts.

"You poor kid."

I blinked. Lorey was perched on the edge of the chair.

"Okay, so I'm poor."

"I'll phone a girl I know—you can talk to her. That's what you boys want to do most, but don't know it."

"Okay." I didn't look at Kim.

She went to the phone, talked to a Joaney, laughed, talked some more and hung up. "She's engaged," she said.

"That's nice."

Kim laughed—a real laugh, something warm and climbing. Lorey seemed startled. I was too, first time I had ever heard a real blast from him.

"What's so funny?" I said.

"Your remark 'that's nice'—truly a gem."

Lorey started to laugh, so I said "good-night" and some other futile words and went to the bunk. Naturally I couldn't sleep so I walked around the big room. In a little while the crew would come. Shicker said he'd be stocking most any day.

Then it hit me. I felt sweat crawl under my eyelids, burn into my head. *She wanted to be alone with Kim.*

I threw myself on the bunk and prayed to God to kill me. I was alive when Kim tip-toed to his bunk.

"Shicker back?" I said.

"No, Gip."

"How'd it go?"

"You've guessed?"

"She's awful religious. I've heard her talk about Heaven and things. Even if she wants to marry you she won't divorce—"

He was very quiet, so I had stopped talking. I'd hit the nail on the finger.

"She's religious," he said, "but not of any special faith."

I got up. "What's that got to do with it?"

He came and sat on the bunk, next to me.

"You see," he said. "My family was converted in the Old Country. That's why I was honest in court. I couldn't bring myself to lie after swearing to God to say the truth."

I started to think.

"You're really religious aren't you, Gip?"

"Little bit."

"In little things, but in the *big things* you are certain of your stand."

"Guess so."

"She's willing to accept your faith."

I got it. "Her marriage to Shicker doesn't count because it was outside your church, eh?"

"I have made a conversion."

I felt sick. "That's dirty—"

"I love her with all my soul."

"Sorry."

"She wants to be married soon."

It was too fast for me. "Shicker?"

"She won't tell him it's I."

"Then?"

"When he finds out I'll deal with him."

"I hate to be an 'I told you so' boy, Kim. But aren't you taking a big chance?"

"Love is the only decent emotion—one should risk all for a few moments of it."

"Damn it, you know what I'm thinking."

"I'm yellow, yes. But in this wild, barren place we will be let alone."

I decided to ease off. "Lucky you believe in kissing."

He mussed my hair.

"Well," I said. "Least I'm sure of one thing."

"What is it?"

"I'm going to open a laundry."

We had a heck of a nice time, swapping ideas, and feeling wonderful. I slept pretty good. Even said a little prayer. Funny how you remember prayers—word for word, and you know they're right. I felt like a little kid. It was the first night that I forgot all about Shicker.

The next week was a hectic one. Shicker started to cow the landscape, and the crew he hired was a tough bunch. They hated him from the first minutes, but they didn't do anything about it, so we just settled down to routine.

Kimmy, of course, was in the clouds. The boys took to him, and I tried not to worry. Maybe Lorey'd get over her crush on Kim, or vice versa. . . .

"SHE told him?"

"Yes." He smiled. "She told him she wants a divorce."

"What did he say?"

"Told her to take a vacation—if she felt the same way when she returned. . . ."

"She could have it?"

"He said 'yes'."

"Kim, when he finds out you're the boy he'll kill you."

"Perhaps."

I grinned. "You'll have the law on your side at least."

"Gip, have you told anyone of Lorey and my plans?"

"No."

"Swear."

"I swear."

"Thank you. I had to tell someone."

"I know."

Shicker told everyone Lorey was leaving for a New York visit on Saturday. Lorey didn't tell her Dad the truth, so the Old Man believed Shicker. Lorey avoided me.

On Saturday morning, an hour before Lorey was to leave, I was polishing the wagon and whistling. Polishing and whistling go together somehow. I was feeling good. This Kim and Lorey deal had been the first time I'd known of a good guy getting a good gal.

I couldn't forget those sessions we'd had while Shicker had been batting around beer halls and rooms. I was a little sad, you're always sad when you lose a good pal.

I kept telling myself that Lorey would have made a nice wife for me too. Hell, I'm a good guy. . . .

* * *

Shicker came down the walk. His face was ripped, and blood rolled down his face. "Have you seen Lorey?" he rattled.

I felt the rag slip from my fingers. "Why no—last night I did."

"I mean this morning." His hands were bloody, the knuckles shiny red.

"No."

"Ask around."

I scooted to the bunk. Kim was lying on the bunk. His face was a crust of blood, the yellow and the white of his skin a flaming red. Maybe it was my eyes. I blinked.

"Who rocked you?" I said.

"Shicker, I was going into the cellar to clean the place—yesterday he told us to do it, remember?"

"Yeah."

"He grabbed me and punched—said I was sneaking around."

"Kim, listen: Lorey's missing!"

"Lorey. Lorey?"

"Take it easy, Shicker's worried too. He can't find her. Did you see her?"

"Not today."

I went to Shicker. "Maybe she went to her Dad's."

"I phoned, she wasn't there."

The boys were called in and ordered to search the buildings and countryside. They found nothing. The sheriff was called in. He found nothing. We were situated thirty miles from town, and twenty miles from the nearest ranch.

* * *

"Uh, Mister Shicker," said Sheriff Lynn, "you two been gettin' along?"

"Yes," mumbled Shicker.

They left him alone, but everybody remembered seeing him in town on drunks.

The Old Man looked at Shicker. "Son, we all know you've been tearing up some. Did Lorey leave you?"

"No."

The sheriff turned on me. "You've been handy man around here since your release from prison. Tell us what you know."

"I don't know anything."

"Did you ever hear them arguing?"

"No."

"Women don't just vanish."

"She was going on a vacation."

"The station master didn't see her."

"I don't know."

"You're on parole—remember?"

"I know."

"Where's the Kim feller?" asked a fat dripping deputy. Sweat stained his face.

"He's beat up," I said. "Shicker jumped him."

"What?" screamed Shicker. "I caught the little yellow con sneaking around."

"You told us to clean out the cellar," I said.

"I know." Shicker shivered. "He was ducking downstairs with a sack and I—" He moaned—"Oh my God, reckon I was crazy with worry over Lorey."

"Where's Kim?" asked the sheriff gently.

"Bunk," I said, and we went there.

LUKEY was bathing Kim's face and Sorp was sticking medical tape over the smaller cuts.

"Heard you were robbing the house," said the sheriff.

"He's lying, Kim," I said.

Sheriff laughed. "Okay, Kim, I was kiddin'." He looked at me, then at the window. "Now, boy, tell me everything you know. About the arguments."

"Arguments?" The word popped out of his mouth, like a guy spitting out teeth. He glanced at me.

I said, "I told you, sheriff, we didn't hear any arguments."

"You mean," said the sheriff slowly, "that his wife told him to go to the saloon every night?"

"Not exactly," I said, "but she didn't mind."

"Why was she going on a vacation?"

"Afraid we're only servants," said Kim. "You are aware of that."

"Sure am," said the sheriff, scowling. "If I find out anything which makes you boys out liars . . ." He smiled. "I know the warden . . ."

"What the hell do you want us to say?" I said.

He shrugged. "I have to try everything, boys. I been wrong lots of times. Got to try everything."

"Why don't you try finding Lorey?" snarled Lukey, and his voice was a long, high, hard slap.

The sheriff jerked.

Sorp waved his arm. "These fellas are all right. Shicker's been givin' 'em hell. If Shicker'd been missing, then maybe you'd have a right to question 'em. But you're all wet, sheriff."

"I ain't blaming the boys. Look: I work in town. I seen Shicker drunk there nearly every night for the past few weeks. He fooled with dames. Now, hell, I got a wife. Ain't it natural for a woman to leave a no good dog?"

"Yes," Kim said softly.

"Looks to me," I said, "like you got to find Lorey first before you can do anything to Shicker."

"Lord," said Lukey, "that's right."

"Now, boys." Sheriff smiled. "Shicker 'course is *number one* boy, but if you keep protecting him I'll have to work on *everybody*. Didn't you ever hear him tellin' her he'd kill her—you know, kiddin' like."

"No."

"No arguments, absolutely no arguments?" Sheriff looked amused.

"Yes," said Kim, "we heard her arguing with Shicker."

"I'll be pickled," yipped Lukey. "You, *Kim*, helping that 'cat!"

Something showed in the sheriff's eyes. It was respect for us, I guess, for sticking to a bad master like little dogs. Only: if we said the whole truth Kim'd be thrown in jail. His record would kill him. Lucky Shicker didn't know about him . . . little dogs can bite, though.

We told him what we'd heard that night.

"And," said the sheriff, "she said she was going away."

"No," I said honestly.

"Okay, boys. Say, Kim, did you do the red work on Shicker's face?"

"Yes, I managed to see a little of his blood."

Sheriff chuckled. "Keep your eyes open, boys. If you can help me *I can help you.*"

"We know," said Kim.

"Say, sheriff," said Lukey. "What was the last time anybody saw Lorey?"

"Six this morning, Shicker saw her

packing her bags."

"He was the last one?"

"Yes."

"Holy smoke," said Sorp. "If he wanted to kill her, he wouldn'ta done it so everything pointed to him."

They took Shicker into town with them and I went to the bunk. Kim was lying on his bunk, looking at the ceiling. His eyes were still, glassy, the misery showed along his jawlines. Twitches, little running, flickering lines jumped alongside his face.

"They'll find her, Kim."

He turned over and faced the wall.

"Cigarette?"

His shoulders shook, little squeaking sounds came from him. I put my hand on his shoulder. He kept on crying.

SHICKER returned at dinner time. He drank coffee and stood on the porch like a mummy. It looked as if even his meanness had been shocked away. He didn't talk to anyone.

I smoked and watched him from the bunkhouse window. *I hadn't been honest with the sheriff.* I knew why he'd killed her—even if we couldn't find her body—he'd killed her. Kim and I knew. If we said the truth everybody would think Kim had killed her. Who'd believe a pair of jailbirds? Who'd believe she was going to divorce Shicker for a Chinese? Kim didn't have a chance.

Shicker loosened up the next day. Work, work, work was the order of the day. "Gotta work," Shicker kept saying, as we waited for instructions. "Gotta work."

I didn't know what to make of Shicker. Was he a killer or wasn't he? If he was he must have known that some man had won Lorey away from him—or do murderers think?

Shicker wasn't his usual self toward us. "Forget about cleaning out the cellar," he said. "I've gotta do something or bust, I'll clean it out."

"Okay," I said.

The next three days went by slowly. Lorey didn't turn up.

* * *

Kim and I were alone in the bunkhouse. He was smoking, his face so dulled by sadness that he looked like a yellow, badly carved thing.

"Come on, Kim, let's talk about something. Even if we have to plan Shicker's funeral."

"Yes."

"Lorey was—."

"Yes, she is dead."

I did my best. "She's just missing."

"In a city I would have hope. Here. . . ."

"Shicker did it. The dirty—"

"I will get him."

"I want a hand in that."

"No, Gip."

"Okay, talk, get it out. I was sick for months when a girl I knew died." I grinned. "I wasn't good for anything for a long while after my mother died."

"I was happy when mine died."

I kept him going.

"She was little and wrinkled—very saintly, poor father."

"Was she always that way?"

"In a different way. Father always was furious, but a good man."

"It isn't right to be that way after you're married."

"Mother always could thoroughly explain herself. She said 'people are continually taking the name of the Lord in vain, yet they argue to His living presence among us'." He made a smile. "'Yet why do they argue so violently over Someone Who doesn't exist'." Again his face was smoothed by the memory. "She'd always say that."

"Good reasoning." I lit the cigarette he'd poked into his mouth.

"She told me never to displease God."

"Was she alive when you went to

jail?"

"No. That's why I'm happy that she's with God."

I fooled with my belt. "You're going to kill Shicker, aren't you?"

"In the slowest possible manner."

"Won't that make you a sinner?"

"I've always been a sinner."

"Look, maybe I'm just a kid, but you can't just fool with religion. It's something strong and—and beautiful. Sooner or later you have to make a decision."

"I know what you mean."

"Yeah."

"Remember how Lorey ate? That's the most beautiful vision on earth, watching the woman you love eat . . ." He was feeling better, I could tell.

"Gip. When I say I'm going to kill him I mean I shall be the one who shall direct his downfall."

I felt fine. "What're you going to do?"

"What's the most terrible thing on earth?"

Earth again. "Why . . . prison I guess. A little cell, a little window, everything's little."

"You should go to college, you're simple enough to retain knowledge."

"How're you going to make them jail him?"

"By proving he killed Lorey."

"You going to tell them about you and her?"

"Never. I know you won't."

"I won't."

He smiled, ripping the silver paper from the cigarette pack, taking the last cigarette out. I held a match to it. He nodded.

"What about your father, Kim?"

"He went home."

"China?"

"Yes."

"Kim—doesn't it say that vengeance is the Lord's?" I liked the guy, I liked him a lot.

"Yes. I'm not angry with God. My mother's work again. She saw to it that I had a complete education—*complete.*"

"Guess she did—in a nice sort of way."

He said quickly, "How long do you think Shicker can last in prison?"

"He likes living."

"Yes he does . . . but prison is not enough for the brutal swine."

I nodded.

"I shall think of something." He smiled. "Did you ever hear of an author named Giovanni Papini?"

I shook my head.

"His book—*Life of Christ*—was the factor which pulled me to God. My mother helped, but that novel was the clincher—as you say. I was a kid when I read it, still am, always will have vague ideas. Reading that book spiked me, as surely as those who nailed Him."

I was getting dizzy.

"Please listen, Gip."

"I'm listening."

"You know why I'm saying this?"

"No—what's this Pa—Pa—the writer got to do with this?"

"I'm not trying to take God's justice."

"Okay." He looked shaky, maybe he was nuts just then. Maybe not.

"Listen: I memorized a paragraph from that book. It's what I live by when I'm not weakened by my body. It's this, Papini's way of describing Christ's Crucifixion."

"Okay, let's hear it.

"You must remember that dying on the cross is most terrible—most terrible."

"Yeah, I know."

"You don't." He frowned, continued. "Here's what I carry inside of me, my special little cross: *'The thirst of their fever, the congestion of their* *hearts, the rigidity of their veins, their cramped muscles, the dizziness and terrible pains in the head, the ever greater agony—'.*"

"I see your point," I said. "A terrible way to die."

"Think it over."

"You going to crucify Shicker?"

"On the Chinese cross."

"What's that?"

"The portion of man which is most tender—*his mind.*"

WE SAT and looked at each other. I guess he'd just been acting human. Trying to make me understand that it was his Christian duty to rid the state of Shicker—and if he could get in his licks, all the better.

"When are you going to get him, Kim?"

He rubbed his eyelids, his fingers fluffing the lids. His eyes showed every so often.

"Well, just let me know when it comes off," I said.

"It will be soon."

"How can you tell?"

"Because Shicker has given himself away. You should know where Lorey is by this time."

"Kim—for—."

"No. I could be wrong, but I doubt it. Now, I must only perfect my means of repaying Shicker."

"Okay," I said. "Me'n you believe in the Big Feller, no use in wrecking yourself with Him—tell the sheriff."

"I can't. My plan is necessary, the mind is the most resourceful tool man has. Everything shall work out. *If I forgot my vengeance Shicker would go free . . .*"

* * *

It did happen, quickly and sharply as most things occur.

I woke up, heard the yelling and went out . . .

The sheriff, Kim and a couple of deputies had Shicker against the wall of the house and Shicker looked sick. I went closer.

"Why did you kill her, Shicker?" snapped the sheriff.

"I—I didn't."

"Her body's been found."

"Where?"

"In the cellar of your house, *this house.*"

"No . . ."

I followed them into the cellar. The big area was clean, the nice smell of the dirt floor hitting my nostrils.

There was a coffin-sized hole near the wall. Shicker screamed something. There were also red paper flowers beside the freshly unearthed grave. I counted them. There were twenty-two of the little paper roses—flowers almost like the ones kids make in school. They fascinated me.

"We knew exactly where to dig," said the sheriff. Hell, Shicker, you put flowers on the grave, little paper flowers that you made."

"You're crazy," yelled Shicker. "I didn't—" He stared at the pit.

I walked to it, looked in. I guess it was Lorey—her hair, her figure. Not her face. Big black smears covered most of her face. Dried, and black.

Maybe Shicker tried to make her tell him who the other guy was . . .

Sheriff said, "We found the red crepe paper which you made the flowers with —in your bedroom."

"I didn't kill her," said Shicker. He was getting his nerve, you could see it. He was getting ready to beat the rap.

"You were the last one with her," snapped the sheriff.

"I didn't kill her."

"YES you did," said Kim softly, his voice coming nicely across the pit.

"You framed yourself."

"I didn't put those damn flowers there—how could I?" Shicker was cool—mad, but cool. "I woulda called the sheriff if I knowed the killer'd buried her in my own cellar."

"But you did kill her," repeated Kim. "Any thoughtful husband would put flowers on his dead mate's grave—if its proximity were so close, in the basement of his home."

Shicker laughed. "Nobody's framin' me." His eyes were tearing.

"I said you framed yourself, Shicker." Kim was cool, very cool, really nonchalant.

"Okay," snapped the sheriff, "give with what you know, Kim."

"He struck me with his fists on the day Lorey disappeared—correct?"

"That's right," said sheriff.

"He had to strike me," said Kim.

"Why?"

"Didn't you see Lorey's face?" Kim turned his back, he came slowly around. "Because he'd killed Lorey with his fists, they were bloody and cracked. He had to have proof that he was in a fight, or someone would think he'd struck his wife—as he'd done."

"Damn," said sheriff, gazing at Shicker. "You had no reason hitting Kim that day. You did it just to have an alibi in case I asked you why your fists were cut."

"And," I said, "he wouldn't let us clean out the basement. Said he wanted to do it himself—for something to do." I started to yell. "He planted her down here, that's why he didn't want us cleaning up!"

"Also the flowers," said Kim. "He's a sadist, somehow some *mad* impulse forced him to pay homage to his mate."

"I didn't—" Shicker stopped. The sheriff had cracked him across the mouth with the barrel of his revolver.

"You killed her," he said.

I got the facts then—Kim had seen the flowers on the grave, and called the sheriff. He'd guessed before I had that she'd been planted in the floor of the basement.

Kim said, "He's as good as in an insane asylum."

"I'm not crazy," screamed Shicker. "I didn't put no flowers on the grave!"

The sheriff looked sheepish. "Reckon the guy's nuts . . . sorry, Shick, come on."

They took him out, the deputies hanging onto Shicker's arms. He really was cutting up like a madman.

Sunlight flushed through the big cellar windows, sprayed over the grave and the little paper roses. Paper roses. The paper had been found in Shicker's bedroom. Everything fitted.

"Kim?"

"Without the roses he would have never paid the supreme penalty for his crime. He could always cling to the fact that he'd bruised his hands on this worthless person."

Then I knew why the little counterfeit American Beauties fascinated me to a feverish pitch. There was a delicate, oh so gentle *oriental* droop to them.

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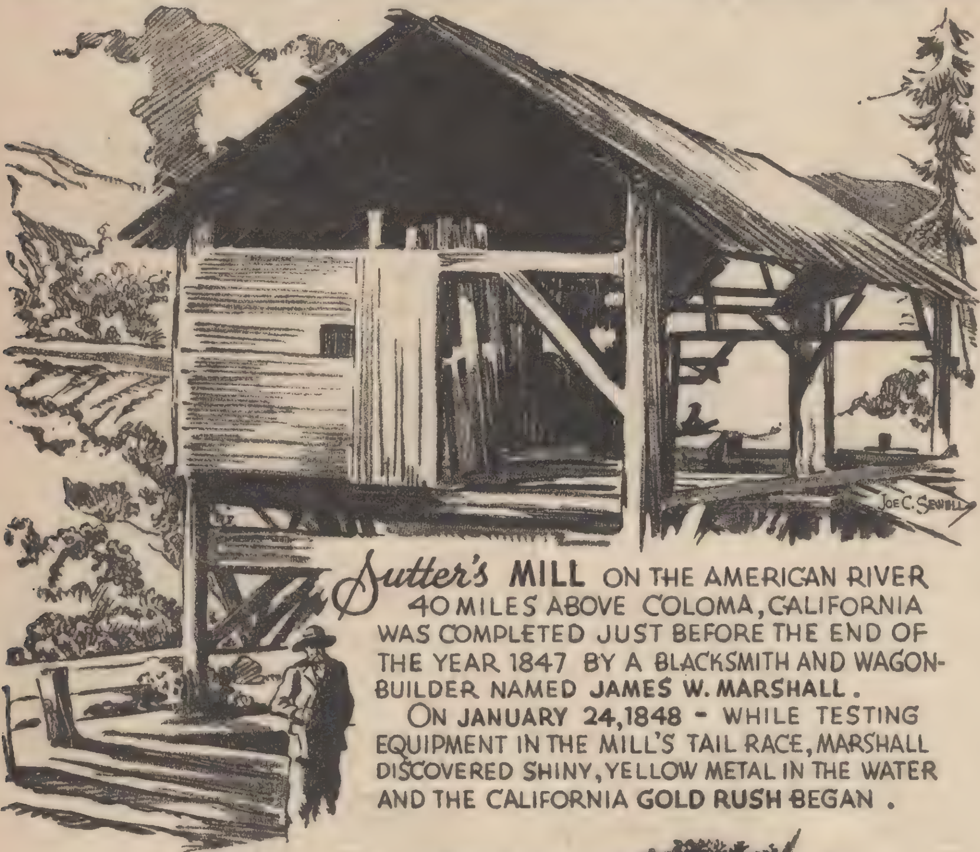
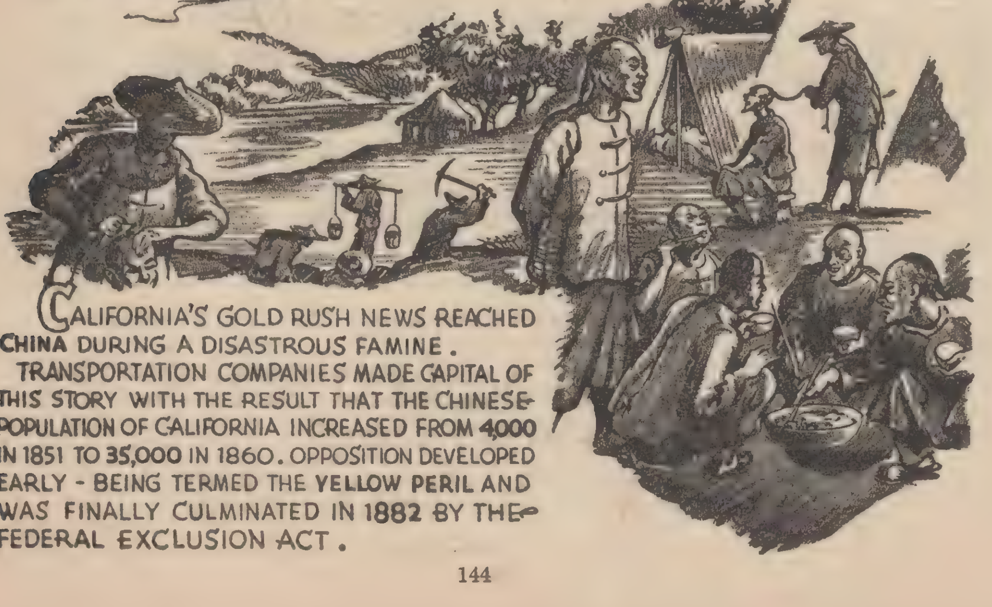


Sutter's **MILL** ON THE AMERICAN RIVER 40 MILES ABOVE COLOMA, CALIFORNIA WAS COMPLETED JUST BEFORE THE END OF THE YEAR 1847 BY A BLACKSMITH AND WAGON-BUILDER NAMED **JAMES W. MARSHALL.**

ON **JANUARY 24, 1848** - WHILE TESTING EQUIPMENT IN THE MILL'S TAIL RACE, MARSHALL DISCOVERED SHINY, YELLOW METAL IN THE WATER AND THE CALIFORNIA **GOLD RUSH** BEGAN.



CALIFORNIA'S GOLD RUSH NEWS REACHED **CHINA** DURING A DISASTROUS FAMINE.

TRANSPORTATION COMPANIES MADE CAPITAL OF THIS STORY WITH THE RESULT THAT THE CHINESE POPULATION OF CALIFORNIA INCREASED FROM **4,000** IN 1851 TO **35,000** IN 1860. OPPOSITION DEVELOPED EARLY - BEING TERMED THE **YELLOW PERIL** AND WAS FINALLY CULMINATED IN **1882** BY THE FEDERAL EXCLUSION ACT.

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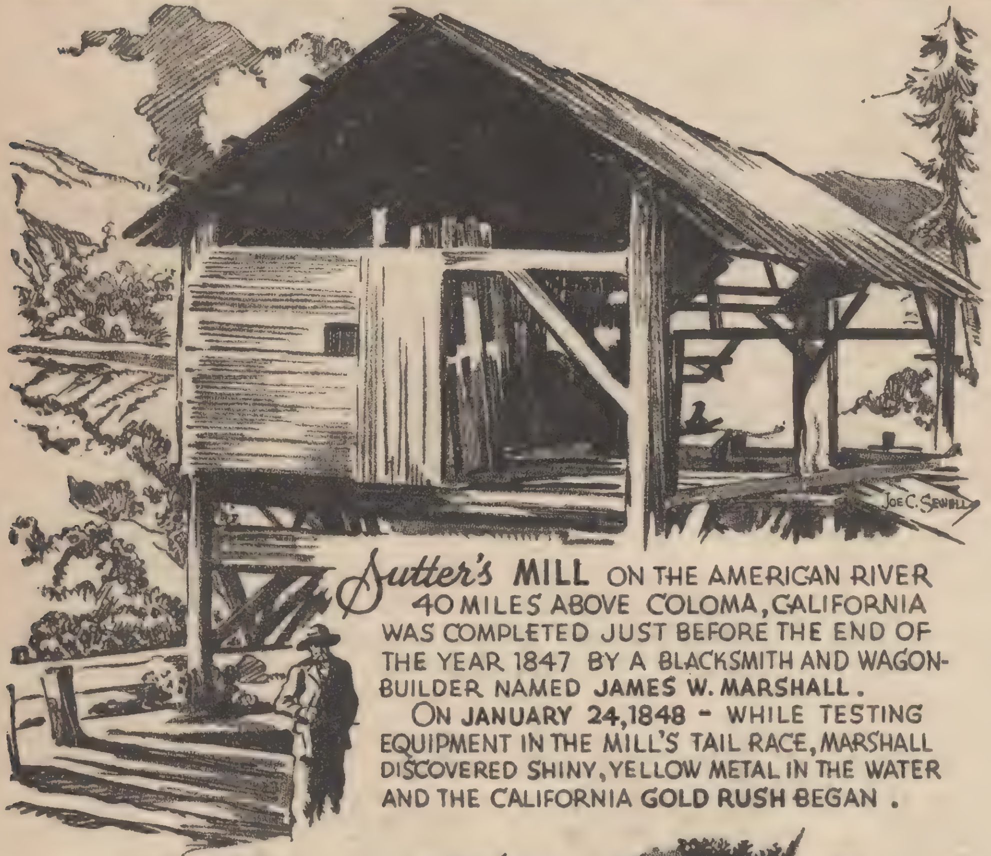

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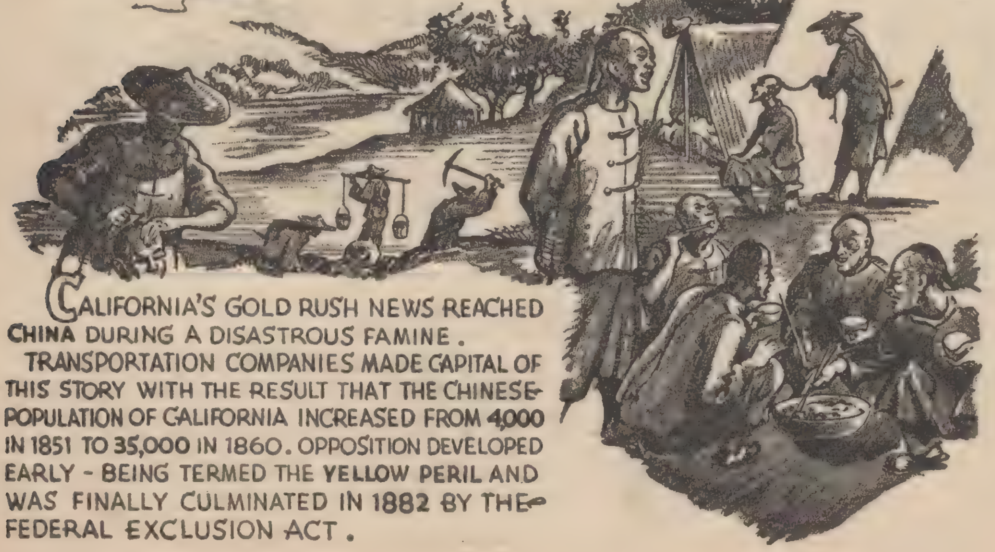

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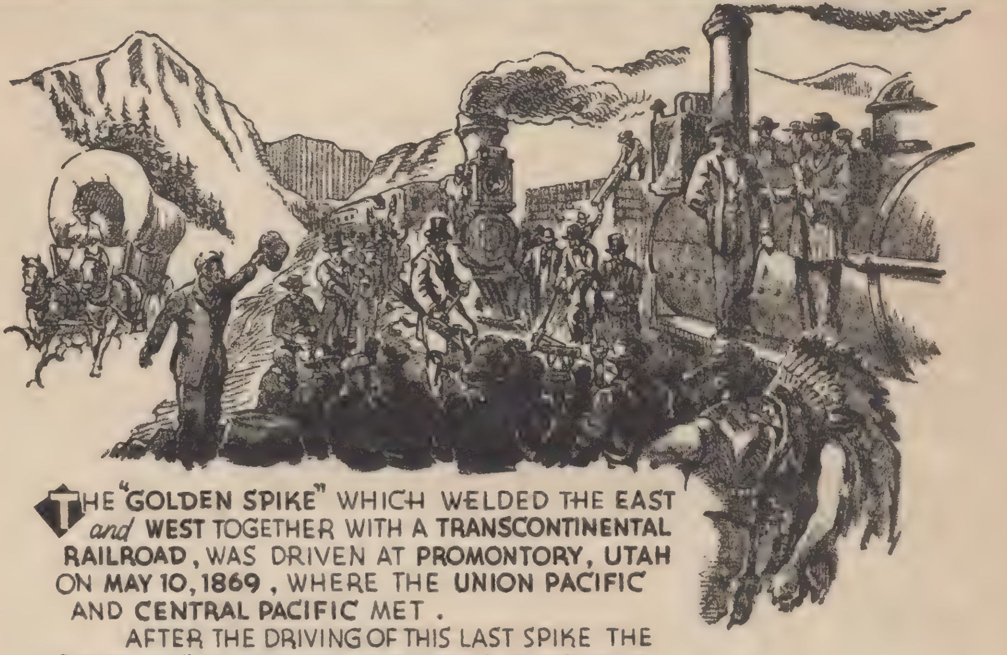
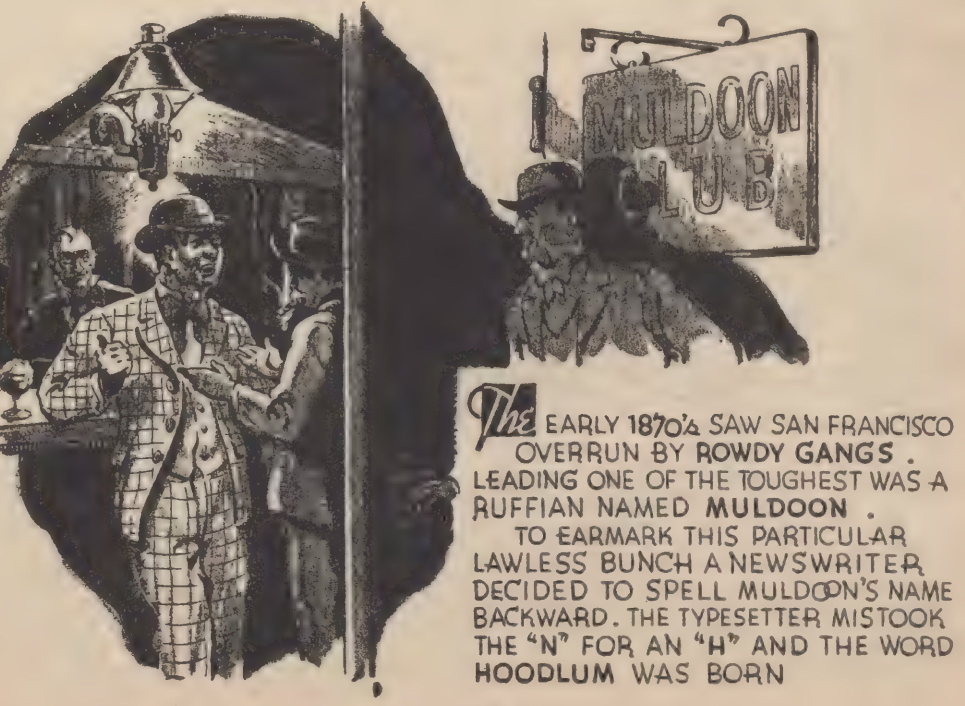


THE "**GOLDEN SPIKE**" WHICH WELDED THE **EAST** *and* **WEST** TOGETHER WITH A **TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD**, WAS DRIVEN AT **PROMONTORY, UTAH** ON **MAY 10, 1869**, WHERE THE **UNION PACIFIC** AND **CENTRAL PACIFIC** MET.

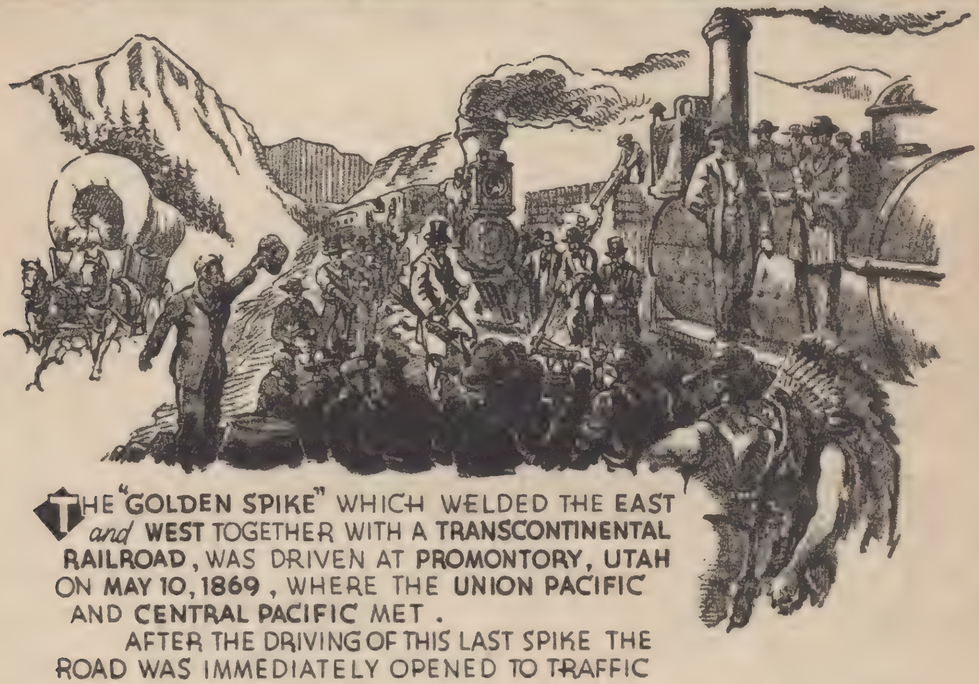
AFTER THE DRIVING OF THIS LAST SPIKE THE ROAD WAS IMMEDIATELY OPENED TO TRAFFIC



The EARLY 1870's SAW SAN FRANCISCO OVERRUN BY **ROWDY GANGS**. LEADING ONE OF THE TOUGHEST WAS A RUFFIAN NAMED **MULDOON**.

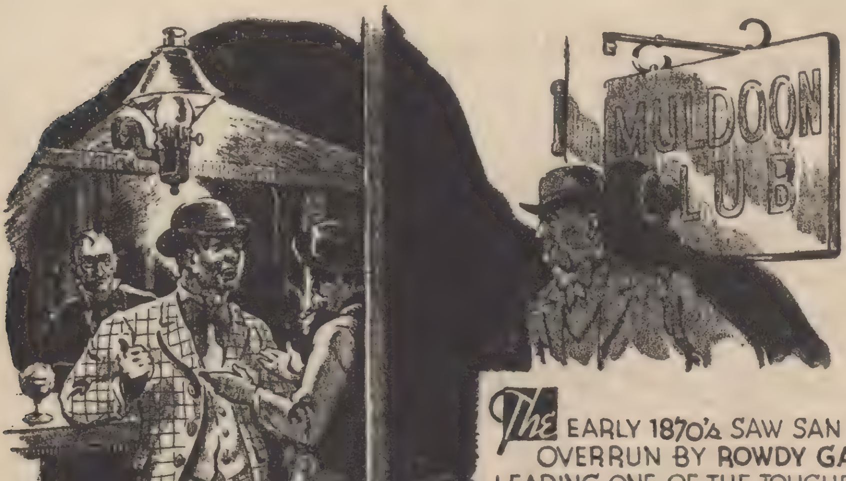
TO EARMARK THIS PARTICULAR LAWLESS BUNCH A NEWSWRITER DECIDED TO SPELL MULDOON'S NAME BACKWARD. THE TYPESETTER MISTOOK THE "N" FOR AN "H" AND THE WORD **HOODLUM** WAS BORN

WEST'S EARLY DAYS



THE "**GOLDEN SPIKE**" WHICH WELDED THE **EAST** *and* **WEST** TOGETHER WITH A **TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD**, WAS DRIVEN AT **PROMONTORY, UTAH** ON **MAY 10, 1869**, WHERE THE **UNION PACIFIC** AND **CENTRAL PACIFIC** MET.

AFTER THE DRIVING OF THIS LAST SPIKE THE ROAD WAS IMMEDIATELY OPENED TO TRAFFIC



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The READER RIDES The RANGE

We're opening up this old department, gang. So start shooting the stuff our way. We'll try to print as many letters as we can, and no matter what you say, we want to hear it—whether good, bad or indifferent!—Ed.

THE OLD WEST

Sirs:

Coming across a copy of your June issue, I was intrigued by some of the letters in the "Reader Rides the Range."

First, the letter from Will Maupin, who I had supposed had passed on years ago. He was just a young man when we both lived in Lincoln, Nebraska, in the '90's.

Then about Custer's Battle. I was camped on the Little Big Horn about 2½ miles from the battlefield—between the battlefield and the Crow Agency, for about two months in 1899, also down at Gary Owen where Reno attempted to cross the river and herd the Sioux up toward Custer. To anyone who took the trouble to look up the record, the truth about the battle was available at that time. The best, most accurate and factual account was written (in my opinion) by Captain Charles King. (Who later became General King.)

Now with regards to cowboy haberdashery.

As a lad of five years I went with my parents on homesteading ventures in Western Nebraska and Eastern Colorado during the middle eighties and early nineties. I was there at the time of the so-called "battle of Wounded Knee." Trail herds were coming through there when we first went out, and it was dangerous to get far away from the homestead shack on foot, for fear of being trampled by a stampede.

The cowboy outfit at that time as I recall it was denim pants (overalls), neckerchief, gauntlet gloves, high-heeled boots, and a low, flat-crowned, stiff-brimmed hat, usually black. If the hat was a good one, the brim was stiff enough to roll along the ground like a hoop. I do not recall whether or not they wore cuffs. The hat usually had a chin strap.

The saddles of that time had a horn with a flat round top about three inches in diameter, double cinch, medium low cantle, no "bucking swells" in front, wooden stirrups three or four inches fore and aft, and frequently with tapaderos. Many a thumb and finger was clipped off by the big saucer-shaped top of the horn when caught between it and the rope. If the rider wished to minimize the danger of hurting himself on the saddle horn when riding a bad horse, he sometimes tied his coat across the saddle back of the horn.

About the turn of the century I went up into Southern Montana and Northwestern Wyoming, and was in and out of there until 1926.

The typical cowboy rig in that area at that time was denim overalls, with a wide cuff turned up at the bottom, Kansas made boots, sole leather cuffs for the forearms, short-wristed "Busby" gloves, neckerchief, flannel shirt with a Bull Durham tag pendant hanging from the pocket, and a soft, medium width, round-brimmed grey hat.

The crown was medium height and was worn with four dents in the crown. A small hole was cut in the brim next to the crown on either side about halfway back, and a narrow latigo strap was passed outside the band around the brow of the hat in the angle between crown and brim, and the ends carried down through to the underside of the brim and tied in a loop which came up under the base of the skull. This kept the hat on in a strong wind.

The "ten gallon" hat was never seen. Some wore a hat with the brim larger fore and aft than from port to starboard, with a crease fore and aft in a crown somewhat higher than the one I have just described. Leather, and "hair" chaps were both worn, mostly the latter. "Batwings" were seldom seen.

The old saddles were giving way to a saddle with a knob on the horn, single cinch, higher cantle, bucking swells, smaller, iron stirrups without "taps," (these later were replaced on some saddles with a large steel ring).

I left Wyoming in 1914 for the East and didn't return until 1918. Before I left some of the cowboys wore the ten gallon sombreros, but when I returned they were coming in big, and long before I left again in 1926, they were standard equipment on the range.

You have hit the nail on the head when you speak of "regional differences." The Southern cowboy who rode through chaparral and mesquite, needed batwings and tapaderos to protect his legs from the thorns and branches. He needed a wide-brimmed hat to protect him from the sun. His exposure to Spanish and Mexican influence disposed him to the use of silver ornaments on his hat band and chaps. The Northern cowboy, on the other hand, needed the protection of the "hair" chap in sub-zero weather, and had no use for "taps" and long saddle skirts.

In the old days, in the regions I was familiar with, we did not have rodeos. We had wild west shows. Buffalo Bill's home town was at Cody, Wyoming. I knew him slightly, and spent many an enjoyable hour listening to him and other of his contemporaries telling tales, tall and otherwise, of the frontier which was beginning to be nothing but a memory even fifty years ago.

I knew some of the participants in the Johnson County War, referred to in your magazine, and knew, and rubbed elbows with many of the men who made Wyoming history both good and bad.

I started to say we did not have "rodeos," but we used to have "wild west shows." Then they were "stampedes," and later degenerated into rodeos. The rodeo and Hollywood horse opera has so mutilated, misrepresented, and thrown out of focus the Old West which I knew that I never read western stories, or see western movies.

Your magazine came to my attention by chance, and I think I shall try to see more of it, for the features in the book seem to get down to earth. The West I knew was that of Owen Wister, Emerson Hough, Eugene Rhodes, Fredric Remington, Bill Cody, and scores of others.

I might point out in closing, that the Montgomery Ward catalog, series 1890 to 1920, should be a very good guide and reference book on all cowboy attire of that period. Also, a cover of the Saturday Evening Post about 1908 had the most authentic picture of a cowboy of that time that I have ever seen.

J. B. Chessington,
147 North Ilex St.,
Fontana, Calif.

There isn't very much we can say in addition to your letter, Mr. Chessington, except that it's a real pleasure to hear from a reader who really knew the West in the "days when." We feel sure that our readers will find your letter very interesting —and we might add that we're going to see that some of our writers read it too!............Ed.

HE'S BEEN BRANDED!

Sirs:

After reading the July issue of MW, John Di Silvestro can keep me up any day or every day in the week until three in the morning reading through to the end of a novel like his excellent "Indian Gamble."

Like the Comanche Chief, Frozen Face, it has been many "sleeps" since I've read anything that has so compelled me to race over sentences and paragraphs.

I would also like to praise another fine story, Don Wilcox's "Limpy's Gulch." Having a game leg myself, but not so bad off as the above to merit any name like "Limpy," I've read a lot of western stories, but never yet ran across one like this, that took time out to treat of the heroic struggles of a game cowpuncher with a bad leg. A great feeling to know that the West was won and made by men other than those with attributes like six feet plus and two hundred odd . . .

Your articles are fine, but will never match your stories if you keep them like the above two. Congrats, then, on a really fine magazine. Keep up "Reflections From the West's Early Days." And also keep up the terrific artwork on the covers and the inside.

Consider yourself as having corraled another stray reader, waiting contentedly, but impatiently, to be branded with your next issue.

R. J. Garnett,
6014 Hoeveler St.,
Pittsburgh 6, Pa.

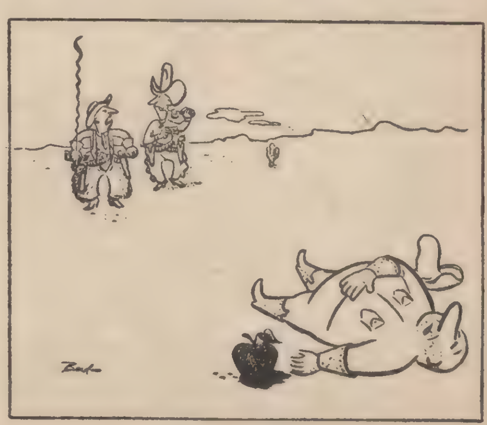
Many thanks for your nice letter. Yes, we thought that "Indian Gamble" was a humdinger of a yarn too. Keep your eye on Di Silvestro. He's one of the new writers to the field, but he's got plenty on the ball. How did you like his yarn in this issue? ....Ed.

WORD FROM ENGLAND

Sirs:

You will not be surprised, I guess, that your magazine has many readers in far-off England. I am one of them, a Polish ex-service man, and I never missed a copy of MW since I first read it. It is a grand magazine, the very best among all the western magazines.

The lead story in your June issue, "Guns Across the Dakotas," somehow, however, failed to ring the bell with me. The story itself was quite good, but the end was absolutely different from what



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I had been led to expect. The story ended leaving the further life of Daisy Swanson "hanging in space." The reader expected to find her married to Miller, as the author hinted clearly at, and picturing Clara Hobbs as a woman of questionable reputation, not suitable for a man like Hub.

But I liked all the rest of the stories. Just keep giving us the present standard of stories and you will find that the circle of your magazine friends will grow even further than where I am reading it.

Jerzy Weglowski,
N.R.A.E.C. Hostel,
Croft Spa Airport
Nr. Darlington,
Co. Durham, England.

We're more than proud to welcome you on our range, Jerzy. It's nice to know that MW has made fast friends in England. We also feel sure that Lathrop W. Hull will find your letter concerning his story very interesting. But in all fairness to the author we'd like to point out here that sometimes a writer deliberately ends a story in a different manner than the conventional one, to create a purpose he may have had in mind. Fiction, like life, does not always end in a happy manner. But you're certainly right in wanting the end to work out o.k. We'll watch it in the future. And we'd certainly like to hear from you again. ....Ed.

BOUQUET FOR GRUBER

Sirs:

While looking for something to read one day, I was attracted by the cover of the August issue of MW, featuring "The Broken Lance" by Frank Gruber. I had seen the film, "Fort Apache," and that may have aroused my interest.

I would like to say that I enjoyed Gruber's novel very much. Possibly the reason I liked it so well was that it reminded me of a story I read in the Post some time back, a novel called "Bugles in the Afternoon." Gruber's story was somewhat like it, and very good.

P. W. Tilley,
10109 S. Stanford Ave.,
Los Angeles 2, Cal.

We hope that this will be only the beginning of your interest in MW, Paul. We've got some really top-notch stories coming up in future issues, and we'll bet you'll really like them. So let's hear from you again..........................Ed.

LOVE IS A STRANGE THING

Sirs:

"Sheepherders' War" in the September issue of MW was very good. The author sure knows his sheepherders! (But how could anyone fall in love with a girl like Carmelita?)

Granny . . .
952 14th St.,
Oakland 7, Cal.

We men are peculiar, Granny...............Ed.

GOLD MINING

★ By J. M. Chase ★

IN the very beginning, gold miners used nothing but the pan, and some were able to get rich with only a bowie-knife to pry the nuggets out of crevices in the creek beds. In the rich deposits they did well by scooping up panfuls of sand and water and washing it out in a swirling motion till there was nothing left but fine gold dust and a little dirt that could be blown off when it was dry. Except for a few rich spots such as a claim at Pine Log that paid four hundred dollars to the pan, there was little ground that paid for the back-breaking work of the getting it out with just the pan. They needed some mechanical way to speed up their work.

The first machine the miners used was called a rocker. It looked something like a baby's cradle open at the foot. It had a hopper box at the head and one man shoveled in the dirt while his partner rocked the cradle, and poured in the dirt. The rocks and gravel were held out by a sheet-iron sieve, but the water carried the fine dirt through and over a canvas apron that slanted towards the head of the rocker. There was a cleat at the end of this apron to catch the gold, and a place for the lighter mud to flow out. Two men with one of these rockers could wash forty times as much as they could with pans in the same length of time.

Seeing so much more gold just waiting to be taken, they figured out ways of getting it out faster. The next improvement was called the Long Tom. It worked on the same principle as the rocker only it was longer and emptied into a sluice that had many cleats at the bottom to catch the gold. It was built at such a slant that the dirt would wash through it without any need of rocking. The next step was when they made the sluice-boxes longer and brought water to them by digging little canals and ditches, so that they could have a steady flow and everyone could shovel in the dirt. They also used quick-silver in the rifles of the sluice boxes to catch the fine gold that otherwise would have gone out with the force of the water. This method of mining worked out just fine as long as the water held out, but during the summer months the small streams would dry up and the miners just piled up their gravel and waited till the rainy season before they could wash it. Or

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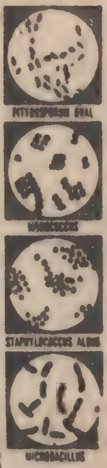

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they carried their dirt to the nearest river and set up a sluice there.

Water played an all important part in placer mining. The Mexicans were the only ones who could do without it, and they used the dry-wash system. They would scoop up the dirt in their big wooden bowls called bateas, and swirl it over their heads in the same motion that the American miner would use with his pan. The coarse stuff would come to the top and they would keep swishing it off till nothing but dust and gold was left. Then they would toss it in the air and let the breeze carry away the dust and the gold would fall on a canvas spread on the ground.

These systems were only used in placer mines. To begin with, all the gold came from the rocks where it was formed while the earth was still cooking. The gold that was in the top layers of soil and rock crumbled away and was washed down streams. The finer it was, the farther it would go. A stream might carry gold for several hundred years and then it would change its course and deposit gold in another region. In this way gold became scattered in all the canyons and even over some of the flat land. Some of the old gold-lined stream beds were covered up with earth and miners had to sink shafts to reach it. Any gold deposited deep or shallow by water is called placer gold.

The spirit of hysteria lasted only as long as the old-style placer mining lasted. There was still gold to be taken from the low-pay dirt that was worked on a big scale by hydraulic rigs which hosed it down the banks with high-powerd streams of water that washed it right into sluices. Monstrous floating dredges were also used. They worked along the rivers and separated the fine gold from the silt. These dredges could handle three thousand times as much dirt as a man with a rocker in one day.

When placer-mining was finished, miners went to the source, to the rocks where the gold had come from. For this kind of mining, you need money, powder, tools, and machinery. A pan or rocker wasn't enough. Hard-rock mining brought in the capitalists, and corporations, and stock-holders. It was the end of the gold rush free-for-all. It was the beginning of quartz mining.

WATCH FOR THIS GREAT
ACTION STORY:

"TYRANNY TOWN"

By S. M. TENNESHAW

IN THE DECEMBER MAMMOTH WESTERN

THE NEW STATE

★ By Don James ★

THE occupation of Monterey was carried out by Commodore Sloat, commander of the United States Pacific fleet. Because Mexico had no ships of any worth and the Californian harbors were wide open, the task proved to be a very simple one. It happened in the spring of 1846. Commodore Sloat was on the west coast of Mexico with five vessels. When he received word that hostilities had broken out with Mexico, he sailed for Californian waters and reached Monterey in early July. There he was faced with the problem of making an important decision. He had not received formal notice of a declaration of war between the United States and Mexico, but if he waited for these officials dispatches to come through from Washington, Admiral Seymour, of the British Navy, would have an opportunity to occupy the Californian ports. So he waited a week, then sent a formal demand for surrender into Monterey, followed it by a force of bluejackets and marines. They took the customhouse, raised the American flag and declared California to be a possession of the United States. Sloat went into Monterey and pledged the United States government to safeguard their rights of religion, property and citizenship as they were accustomed. In a week Commodore Stockton arrived in Monterey to relieve Sloat, and he took command of the Pacific fleet. He took over the rest of the Californian ports and completed the conquest of the province. All the ports were occupied without opposition and the situation looked so hopeless to the California leaders, Pio Pico and Jose Castro, that they dismissed their forces and escaped to Mexico. With all resistance gone, Stockton sent Kit Carson to Washington to tell President Polk that American sovereignty had been extended over all California and that it was entirely free of Mexican domination.

Stockton placed Captain Gillespie in charge of Los Angeles, giving him only fifty men to keep order in a very unruly city. Gillespie was not the man for the job. He was obnoxious and arbitrary and dictitorial, and made useless rules just to annoy the people. He even had respectable citizens of the community arrested and brought to him just to humiliate them. The citizens of Los Angeles resented Gillespie and were quick to take advantage of his lack of men. So

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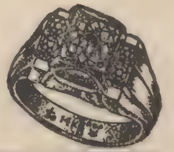

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early one morning a group of loyal Californians attacked the sleeping Americans. There was no blood shed, but when Gillespie tried to arrest the leader of the mob, the citizens rose in open revolt. The movement spread like wildfire, and before they knew it, the Americans were surrounded by five or six hundred Californians led by Jose Maria Flores. The Americans were in a dangerous position, and they persuaded John Brown, known in California as Lean John, to sneak through the enemy lines and carry word of their predicament to Stockton who was still in Monterey. His message was written on cigarette papers and hidden in his bushy hair. Lean Brown left the American camp at night, but his escape was detected, and about fifteen Californians took off after him. They were armed with lances and escopetas. When he was just a few feet from a gulch thirteen feet wide, they fired at him and a ball struck his horse in the leg and passed through his body. The horse was so startled that he leaped over the thirteen foot gulch, and ran at top speed for three miles before he dropped dead. The Californians could not get their horses to jump the gulch and were slowed down considerable. Lean John then ran twenty seven miles to the Ranch de la Virgin where he obtained a fresh horse. Then without any rest he rode on to Monterey, only to find that Stockton had gone to San Francisco. When he reached San Francisco, he realized that he traveled five hundred miles on horse back and twenty seven miles on foot in less than five days!

Stockton sent Captain Mervine in the Savannah to relieve the besieged Americans, but in the meantime Gillespie was persuaded to capitulate, and he had marched out of the pueblo for San Pedro.

SNAKE DANCE

★ By Jack Hart ★

THE snake is an object of great respect among uncivilized people. The deadlier the snake's power, the deeper the reverence for him. The Pueblo Indians often used serpents to protect their houses from evil spirits and from mice. They held the rattle snake to be the most sacred, and up until a few years ago, each Pueblo town maintained a huge rattle snake which they kept in a sacred room, and with great solemnity, fed it once a year.

Up until a few years ago the Moqui Indians held a snake dance every two years. For sixteen days before the ceremony, the professional men were in solemn preparation for this sacred event. They sat in sacred rooms carved out of solid rock, and for many days no food passed their lips. They lived on a bitter tea called "mah-que-be," made from a sacred herb which was to give them security against snake poisoning. They also rubbed their bodies with prepared herbs.

Six days before the dance, the snake-men would go down into the Mesa and hunt eastward for rattlesnakes. Upon finding one, the hunter would tickle the angry reptile under the chin with a snake whip until it would start to run. Then he would grab it and thrust it into a bag. The next day the hunt would be to north, the third day, to the west, and last they would hunt the south. That is the only possible way in which a Pueblo dares to box the compass.

The sacred snakes are kept in a sacred room, free to roam about among the deliberators. The night before the dance, the snakes are cleansed with great solemnity at an altar which the snake captain has made of colored sands. On the day of the dance, the snakes are put in a buckskin bag and placed in a booth made of cotton wood branches. The spectators line the court and perch on top of their houses, and about sunset the twenty men of the Antelope Order emerge from their own special room in single file and march around the court. Their captain sprinkles them with some fluid from an eagle feather, and then they dance and shake their gourds in front of the snake booth. Among the dancers are little children having been admitted into the order that very day. They begin their training for the snake-dance at the age of four.

Soon seventeen priests of the Snake Order enter the court and circle it four times stamping hard in front of the snake booth to let the spirits know that they are presenting their prayers. Then the captain of the Snake Order reaches into the booth and unties the bag and pulls out a big squirming snake. He holds it in his teeth and starts a hippity-hop dance around the court attended by an Antelope-Man. Then the next Snake-priest pulls out a snake and takes it with his teeth, and so on till each snake-man is dancing with a writhing snake in his mouth. At a certain place in the court, each man gives his head a sharp snap and throws the snake to the ground and then goes back for another reptile. Sometimes a couple hundred snakes were used. The men sometimes get bitten but they continue with the ceremony as if nothing had happened. They never seemed to be affected by the bites.

At last they all rush together and throw their snakes into a horrid heap of threatening heads and buzzing tails. Then they

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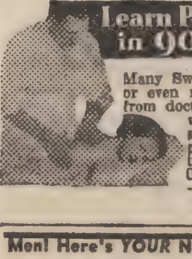

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leap about the pile and sprinkle sacred cornmeal on them. Finally they thrust their arms into the writhing mound and grasp as many snakes as they can carry, and go running with them to the four points of the compass. When they reach the bottom of the Mesa, they release the snakes unharmed.

Then the dancers go to their sacred purification with the secret herb, and the awed spectators return to their quaint homes, rejoicing at the successful conclusion of the most important of all the public ceremonials of the Moqui.

SHORT-HAUL EXPRESS

★ By Miles Wilson ★

THE name of Wells Fargo instantly comes to mind when you mention transportation and expressing in connection with the west. It was the biggest and the most famous of the numerous lines, and the battles that it had with such notorious outlaws as Jesse James, did much to further its notoriety. But there were equally important other firms too.

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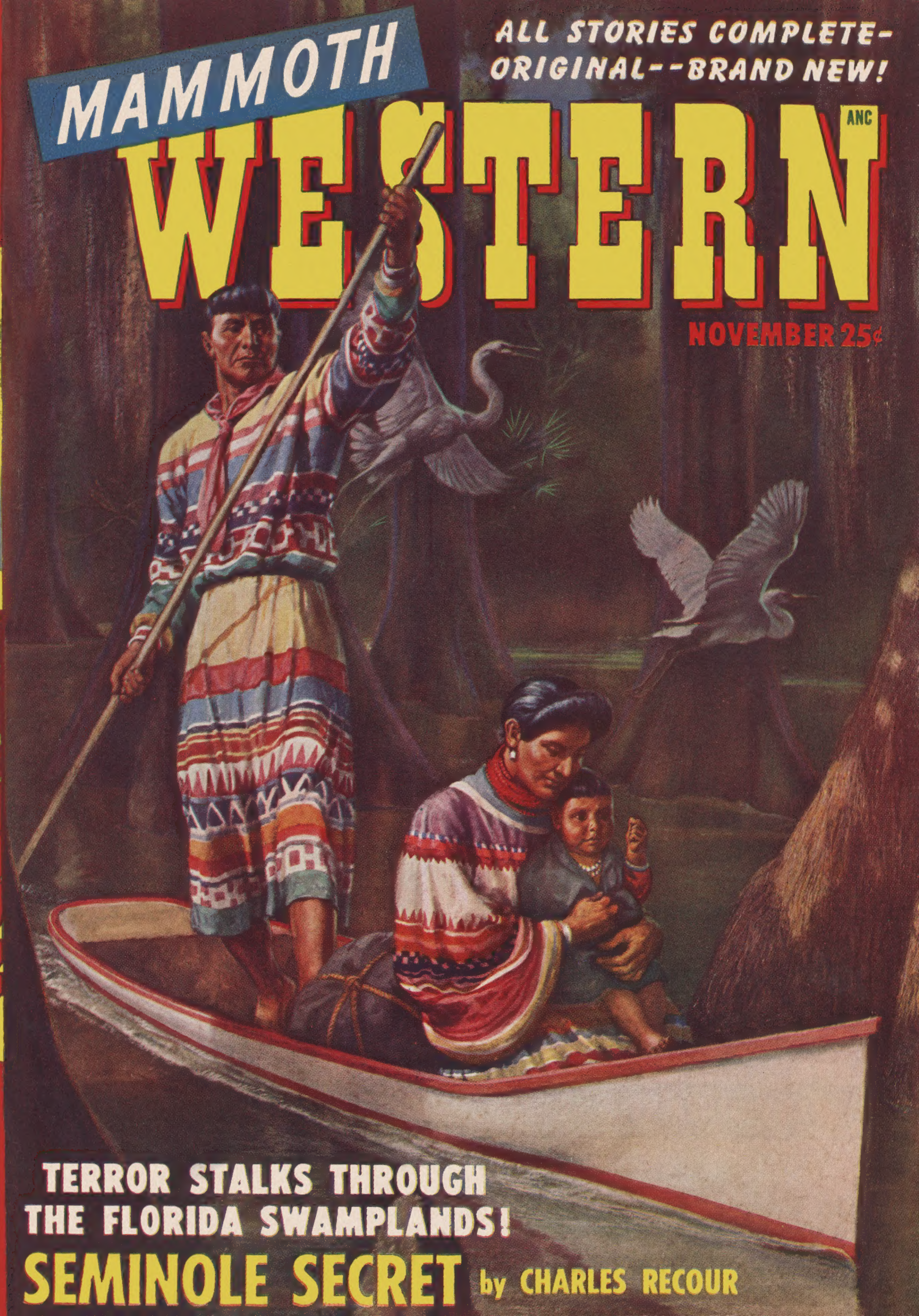

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